University of Alberta

Voices from the Heart of the Circle: Eight Aboriginal Women Reflect On Their Experiences At University

By

Jane Vera Martin

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in

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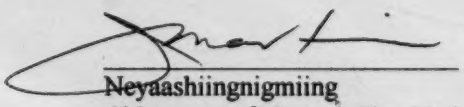

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Voices from the Heart of the Circle: Eight Aboriginal Women Reflect On Their Experiences At University* by Jane Martin in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in First Nations Education.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my brother, James Charles MacEwan Martin, whose tragic death on March 25, 1998, sadly left a big hole in my life and in the hearts of our family. My memories of you are a treasured gift and I know that without your love and support from the spirit world, this dissertation would not have been written.

Chi Meegwetch "Jimmy".

Abstract

This work summarizes the history, insight, and knowledge that three small groups of Canadian Aboriginal women shared with each other and with the readers of this work, in a series of talking circles during the winter of 1999-2000. The research focus was to find out, through the women's general description of their university experiences, how they retrospectively assessed the impact of university life on their personal and cultural sense of identity as Aboriginal people.

This work was built around Talking Circles, an indigenous tradition predicated on mutual respect amongst participants, in which people speak from the heart without interruption or censure and with scrupulous regard for the truth. In the first circles, nine women with experience and authoritative knowledge about the tradition considered whether it was culturally appropriate to incorporate the Talking Circle as a research activity, and, if so, what protocols for convening, recording, and reporting, should inhere in the research process. Those "Guidance Circles," produced a rationale and motivation for convening "Story Gathering Circles" where the research question could be explored. They further specified protocols for convening the specific Story Gathering Circles for this project. The protocols addressed two areas: research validity and cultural integrity. The protocols recognize, first, that used inappropriately, the Talking Circles could compromise either areas, or both; and second, that "research validity" and "cultural integrity" are in fact coincident, different ways of expressing the same concern for respect for truth. One clear methodological finding is that when Talking Circles are used in

research, only people who have earned the traditional right to do so should convene them.

Prior to attending the University of Alberta, most of the women did not have a well-defined and positive self concept about being Aboriginal women. Although they may not have expected, at university, to find out who they were as Aboriginal people, that re-definition became the most significant common experience amongst the women in the Talking Circles.

Preface

Guiding Words

We've been asked by the Creator and by our people, as researchers, to go out and to find these herbs, these metaphorical herbs for our future needs. We are the contemporary version of hunters that are given the task of finding things for the people: where is there clean water, where are the safe places, where is the winter camp, and where is the summer camp. Even though we are sent out—sometimes alone—to find these things, we are not alone. But we do feel that we are isolated from our community because we're on this path; that is our responsibility. We look at it and say, "Okay, I see what's coming. I see the forces of nature. I see the white man's society and we're looking at all these things, and we're analyzing it in relationship to how our people are. And our people, today, are starving and hungry and living in destitution. And we are asked, I believe spiritually as well as intellectually, to come forward and do these things and to become the day's hunters: the finders.

I think that we at university are like an advance camp, or a fish camp, or a hunting camp, or a camp for getting ready to go get the berries or the medicines, or the visions. It's a staging area, a preparing ceremony. It's a place where we get people ready for the personal and spiritual tasks that they need to do. The readiness doesn't come from telling them that this is specifically what they have to do, but from getting them into the spirit and mind frame, and giving them the confidence, courage, and tools to enter into the mysterious woods. That is our function. It's a sacred responsibility.

As researchers and as students we pay a price, loneliness. If there is purpose to that loneliness then the task becomes bearable because we know that we are going to come back from a purposeful journey and we'll be coming back with valuable things. So when we return to our community we can say, "Look here, this is what I have found, this is what I've seen, these are the stories I've heard, and this is what I've learned. How can we now use these things for our place and time?"

—Lewis Cardinal, 2000

Acknowledgements

The list of people for whom I am indebted is long.

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I am most grateful for my children, Tina and Keith, who sacrificed the most by having to share their mom with what feels like the birth of another child. You both have sustained me in ways you were not aware by teaching me that which is important in life.

Thank you to my mother, Vera Martin, who found her own way to the 'good red road' at a time when the footprints of others were not visible. The path you walked then and now, made it possible for me and many, many others to find their way.

Thanks to my father, Peter Martin, my brothers, Raym, John, Rick, Jim, Howard and my sisters Grace and Charlene who are constant reminders that intelligence has little to do with the institutions of higher education. You have always maintained the sharpest of wit and humour of any minds I know.

The credit for this degree also belongs to the Nawash First Nation whose continuous support throughout the past four years was critical to my survival, well-being, and success. Cape will always be the place where I was born and the place where I will always return – home.

Many thanks to the Sinclairs who have always served as my surrogate family in Edmonton, providing all of the familiar comforts of home. In particular, I thank Rocky Sinclair, my companion and life partner whose faith in my ability far exceeded any I had in myself; and my closest friend, Jeannette Sinclair, who truly understood and nurtured my emotional needs without my ever having to speak them.

Thank you to my friends, Jeannine Carrier, for always leaving the door to your home open to me; to Lois Edge for sharing your gift of poetry and prose and bringing a new standard of excellence for emerging Aboriginal scholars to embrace; to Angela Wolfe, whose playful spirit helped me to uncover my own; to Lewis Cardinal, whose vision for indigenous education, and the integrity and humility upon which your leadership rests, inspires me in ways I have not otherwise seen; to the staff at Native Student Services who are a community in the true sense of the word; to the Buffalo Women in my life who continue to shape my identity as an Aboriginal woman, and to all the countless others – meegwetch, you know who you are and all that is in my heart.

Thanks to my supervisors, Stan and Peggy Wilson, and to my cohort group in the First Nations Graduate Education Program who provided the foundation upon which I was able to learn and grow. To the members of my Committee, in particular Dave Collett who en-"couraged" me to push the envelope if it made sense to my Aboriginal spirit. Manu Meyer, your critical read of my thesis went well beyond the responsibility of an external advisor, to open my mind and touch my heart in new ways.

I offer special thanks to Dr. Louise Million, who refused to give me permission when I sought to quit at a time when I had no energy, will, or desire to continue. Your teachings about the spirit that lay in the words -- shared and written -- breathed life back into my weak spirit and made me strong once again.

To my friend and mentor, Dr. Carl Urion, thank you for being that 'Elder' in my life for all these years and for always reminding me about the importance of prayer in all that we do. Thank you for recognizing the strengths and gifts inside of me and for guiding so many of us students in a way that others could not.

I owe much to each of you and consider myself honoured and blessed to have you in my life. You are *all my relations*.

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Background

Canada's relationship with Aboriginal people is well-documented as being characterized by European colonization and dominance, with the Indian Act conceived and implemented as a way of imposing foreign political, economic and social systems. In particular and beginning in the late nineteenth century, Canada's government imposed a system of residential schools as the primary means of assimilating Aboriginal people into the Euro-Canadian culture. This system separated children from their family and community, imposed a foreign religion and language and provided basic literacy through to Grade 8 with a simplified curriculum and expectations (Barman, Hebert & McCaskill, 1986, p.9; Assembly of First Nations, 1994, p.16). In addition to cultural fragmentation, the outcome was, and continues to be, the economic and social marginalization of Aboriginal people within Canada (Young, 1996).

In the late 1960's, the Liberal government's 'White Paper', and the subsequent response of Aboriginal people, called the Red Paper, altered the relationships between the government of Canada and Native peoples, including those affected by Native education policies (Canada, 1969). Aboriginal communities have since assumed control of their children's education, especially at the elementary and high school levels and over the past decade, the number of First Nations who have taken charge of post-secondary funding has also grown. There has been a parallel increase in post-secondary enrollment of Aboriginal students (Assembly of First Nations, 1999). Aboriginal student success, however, continues to fall far below a desirable level: fewer than 30% of those First Nations students who begin undergraduate studies complete a degree (Archibald, Bowman, Pepper & Urion, 1995).

Today, levels of post-secondary education among Aboriginal people continue to be much lower in comparison to the non-Aboriginal population. According to the 1996 Census, 4.5% of Aboriginal people graduate from university compared to 16% of the non-Aboriginal population. Aboriginal people in the 20-29 age group remain only one-half as likely to have a post secondary degree or diploma, one-fifth as likely to have graduated from university and over twice as likely not to have completed high school as the general population (Canada. Statistics Canada, 1998). Interestingly, these same

statistics note that Aboriginal people have a greater tendency than non-Aboriginal people to return to school as adults. This corresponds with the situation at the University of Alberta where the average age of Aboriginal students is estimated to be 25 years (Native Student Services, 2001). Overall, the relatively high rate of Aboriginal adults entering universities, combined with high drop out rates, raises questions about the extent to which Canada's post-secondary institutions accommodate the needs of Aboriginal students.

Some of the reasons cited in the literature for the failure of Aboriginal students in post-secondary institutions include poor academic skill development in the K-12 grade levels, financial hardship, the 'culture shock' of being away from home, racism, lack of support services and a wide range of personal issues (Assembly of First Nations, 1999). In short, most of the studies done to date focus on identifying the factors that impede success. The experience of Aboriginal students who successfully complete their post-secondary studies has been less well documented and will be the subject of this study.

Personal and Campus Climate Background

Personal Background of the Researcher

I entered university knowing that successful completion would change the professional opportunities available to me. Back in 1987, I did not expect that being a university student would move me towards resolving important and deeply personal life issues. In addition to the intellectual and academic knowledge I acquired, my life was changed spiritually and emotionally. I found a strong Aboriginal community on campus and began to explore aspects of my Aboriginal heritage and culture in new ways. In retrospect, two things were happening for me. First, I was obtaining a university degree and professional qualification, and second, I was learning to understand and reconcile my confusion concerning my identity as an Aboriginal person. Certainly, my own experience provided impetus for this research. I was curious how other Aboriginal individuals who succeeded at university might describe and make sense of their experiences.

I have also worked as an employee of post-secondary institutions. I coordinated an Aboriginal University and College Entrance Program (UCEP) at Concordia University College, Edmonton, from 1992 to 1995. I was the Acting Director of Native Student

Services at the University of Alberta from 1995 to 1996. Currently, I act in an advisory capacity to Native Student Services at the University of Alberta. Over a fifteen year period of working in post-secondary environments, I have found that Aboriginal students enter post-secondary institutions with the intention of being successful and of contributing to their communities. Monture-Angus (1996), an Aboriginal law professor, states the latter point in this way: "It is not the degrees that are important--it just makes it a little bit easier to do what my real work is and that work is with my people" (p.77). This study is a partial requirement for the completion of university studies and, equally important, the topic selected and the study itself are my way of contributing to the Aboriginal community.

Campus Climate

Located in Edmonton, the University of Alberta is the largest and oldest of the four universities in the province, and is one of the major universities in Canada. It is a major research centre with a full time student population of over 30,000. Until the mid 1970s, Aboriginal representation in the student population was miniscule. Increase in the Aboriginal student population was steady between 1975 and 1995, but Aboriginal people are still not proportionately represented on campus. In the spring of 1996 the University's central administration created an ad hoc committee to assess Aboriginal student opinion about their experiences at the university. I was a member of the group and collaborated in the design of a questionnaire that was mailed to all the 543 students on campus who had identified themselves to the Registrar or to the Office of Native Students as being Aboriginal. Though classes were over and most students were gone, there was return rate of 30% (i.e., 159 responses were mailed back). Only cautious inference can be made to the Aboriginal student population at large, but that return rate (coupled with the fact that distribution of responses by faculty and year were fairly close to the overall distribution) provides for at least a good indication of the way students perceived the campus and their experiences here (Asch et al., 1996).

The results were never published. Because it has not been published, I will discuss the results more comprehensively than if it were more readily available.

Acts of Prejudice, Stereotyping and Racism

Is there an acceptable or predictable level of racism? We know it is out there, but when so many students have witnessed or experienced it, it is clear that the University of Alberta has a problem with racism on campus. One of the findings no one anticipated was that it appeared that students saw the campus as a less welcoming place the longer they stayed on campus. For example, we asked "Have you experienced prejudice, stereotyping, or racism at the University of Alberta, directed at you?" Forty-three percent of the students said they had. When asked whether or not they had witnessed such things directed at others, 52% responded "yes." Yet when the responses are broken down by "Years on Campus", we found almost a third of the "no" responses came from first-year students. The "yes" column grows with each year on campus, and amongst fourth-year and graduate students the overwhelming majority report experiencing or witnessing prejudice, stereotyping, or racism. Of those who responded "yes," 85% said the basis for the act(s) appeared to have been ethnicity; 42% had witnessed this behaviour based on gender; 3% based on handicap; and 15% on "other" characteristics (e.g., i.e., sexual orientation, appearance, single-parent status).

When asked specifically who had perpetrated acts of racism: 45% of all students said they had seen non-Aboriginal students perpetrate acts of racism 24% per cent said they had witnessed overt racist acts by instructors; 16% said they had seen Aboriginal students or staff commit acts they considered racist; with fewer having witnessed such acts by support staff (10%) and service personnel (6%). We asked those who had witnessed or experienced racist acts "Have those actions or comments had an effect on the way you feel about being on campus, or about studying at the university?". A majority (66%) said they had, and 34% said they had not.

Relationship with Instructors

We asked students to report their experience with instructors, to mark whether "all," "most," "few," "some" or "none" of their instructors could be said to meet a set of expectations for fostering a learning environment. We assumed that these were minimum expectations, so in an ideal post-secondary environment, most students would report that most instructors met these expectations.

1. Yet only 40% of the respondents said that most of their instructors took an active interest in their learning;

2. 60% said that most instructors were reasonably accessible to talk to;
3. 50% said that most instructors tried to make sure that the students understood the material;
4. 59% said that most professors encouraged students to raise questions;
5. 65% thought that most instructors showed respect for the students;
6. 70% thought that most instructors were fair in the way they evaluated student work; and.
7. only 41% thought that most instructors were understanding of personal situations that influence student work.

The other side of the coin, of course, is that 60% of the people who answered the survey thought that only a few professors took an active interest in their learning. Forty per cent reckoned that any more than a few professors encouraged students to raise questions. This is another area in which the students seemed to reflect more negative judgement, the longer they were on campus. By graduate school, a majority of the students thought that only "some" or "a few" instructors demonstrated a basic respect for students.

Most students appear to have been penalized for raising alternative explanations or perspectives, because only 41% of the respondents report that none of their instructors have done that.

When asked to assess the way that instructors approach Aboriginal people and issues, 60% of the students saw patterns of instructors unknowingly making racist statements, and 37% of the students said that some professors apparently deliberately make racist statements. Most of the students had seen instructors treat Aboriginal students differently from others, or seem to have different expectations of Aboriginal students (55%). Eighty-three percent of the students had experience with professors who seemed to be unaware of Aboriginal issues. The same pattern of increasingly negative assessment with years on campus was particularly clear with respect to student assessment of instructor awareness of Aboriginal issues.

Surprisingly, the same patterns held when students were asked to report their opinions about instructors who dealt specifically with Aboriginal issues: 99% of the students had had experience with instructors who seemed to be respectful or open to what

they saw as an Aboriginal perspective, and deal with Aboriginal issues fairly and evenly. Yet 58% had had experience with instructors who seemed to be antagonistic to an Aboriginal perspective, even amongst instructors who dealt with Aboriginal issues. Most (54%) of the students reported having been uncomfortable when instructors who are specialists in Aboriginal issues raise those issues; and 54% reported experiences of seeing instructors single Aboriginal students out, expecting them to represent Aboriginal people.

Academic Experience and Aboriginal Issues

More than two thirds of all students said that they were satisfied with the academic aspects of their programs, but that same pattern (more negative judgement, the longer a student had been on campus) raised serious issues: by fourth year, only around one third expressed satisfaction, and more than half of those who had been on campus longer than four years said that their academic program was not satisfactory. Yet 90% of all students said that their overall experiences on campus had contributed to their personal and intellectual development.

Only approximately one third of the students thought that Aboriginal issues had been dealt with appropriately, in enough detail, and with enough consideration for diversity in the Aboriginal population. When asked whether or not their program had met their expectations in terms of how Aboriginal issues had been dealt with, the pattern was even more pronounced: two-thirds of first-year students had their expectations met; by second year, two thirds said their expectations had not been met, a pattern which held until post-fourth-year, where less than 15% said that their program had met their expectation.

That unpublished study documents a social context and a campus environment that provides a fairly graphic background for discussing other aspects of Aboriginal student experience at the University of Alberta.

Research Focus

This study proposed to approach the issue of Aboriginal people in post-secondary education by exploring the experience of Aboriginal students who attended the University of Alberta and successfully completed their undergraduate degrees. I began thinking about this topic during a graduate level course in Education Foundations at the University of Alberta. Eight of the nine students enrolled were Aboriginal, and the

sharing of our own and each other's ideas for research was encouraged. The more I listened, the more I realized the significance of the impact of our Aboriginal identities on our university experience, including the selection of our research topics and methods and the desire that our research contribute in some meaningful way to improving life for our people and communities. At the same time, I realized that the reverse is also true. The university experience impacts on our sense of identity in unique ways.

My own experience, along with my interest in and commitment to the issues that face Aboriginal post secondary students, led me to this research study, which focuses on the experience of Aboriginal women in one post secondary institution—the University of Alberta. I sought to hear the voices and stories of Aboriginal women as they speak about their lives prior to, and during, their years at University in an attempt to explore and understand the extent to which Aboriginal women's identity is impacted by the university experience.

Research Question

I began this research thinking that I would explore the question of identity. Each time I described my idea for a study, the first question I was asked concerned the definition of identity. As I see it, identity is a concept that means many things to different people and my research interest was not with formal theories and propositions about what identity is and what it is not. The formal approach is limited, according to A. Wilson (1996), because most Western theories simplify identity development, considering it to be the result of a sequential progression of occurrences rather than the simultaneous occurrences and development that determine identity development from an Aboriginal or holistic perspective: "The emphasis of the Indigenous American worldview on the interconnectedness of all aspects of an individual's life challenges the compartmentalized structure of developmental stage models" (p.310). The Aboriginal worldview encompasses a much broader-based understanding of identity.

Consequently, I realized that it would be more appropriate to ask a question about experience, events and situations that occur in day-to-day life during an Aboriginal student's attendance at university. I decided, in other words, to allow the issue of identity to emerge in its own way, if at all. With this in mind, I re-focused my question and framed it this way:

How do selected female Aboriginal graduates at the University of Alberta describe the university experience generally, and in particular its impact on their personal and cultural sense of identity as Aboriginal people?

It is necessary to reiterate the distinction between the topic of identity as the subject of interest for this study and the more common concern with the psychological Euro-Western concepts of identity development. My definition of identity refers to the 'feelings' we have about who we are. In this study, identity is the lived experience of being Aboriginal. In other words, an Aboriginal person is defined as any individual who self identifies as such.

Finally, it is important to note that the terms used to describe Indigenous people have undergone several transitions over the years. Most recently, the term 'Indigenous' refers in a general or global sense to land-based people's philosophies and values (Smith, 1999). I have chosen to use several terms interchangeably including Aboriginal, First Nations, Native, Metis and Indian. I do not distinguish between the categories defined by the Canadian Constitution such as Metis, Inuit, Bill C-31, Non-Status and Treaty.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to provide one vehicle for collective expression for a group of Aboriginal women who had completed their undergraduate degrees. They are drawn from a larger group that, by comparison to other populations in post-secondary education, can be said to be marginalized. Individually they are articulate and expressive but insofar as the group is marginalized, their stories are not as familiar as the stories of others. That is the way in which, in Virginia Olesen's (1994) words, I wanted to "give voice to the voiceless" (p.169). Given the under-representation and the high drop out rates of Aboriginal students in educational institutions, understanding the experience of students who successfully complete their studies is of interest to a number of parties. An increased awareness of Aboriginal student experience could be of benefit to university policy makers, instructors, front line support staff, and fellow students. The findings of this study will also be helpful to Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal education program coordinators and support staff, and to post-secondary Aboriginal students, both current and prospective.

Significance of the Study

Educational institutions such as the University of Alberta have a vested interest in graduating students, including those of Aboriginal origin. In fact, the University of Alberta has an Aboriginal Student Policy that seeks to increase Aboriginal student enrolment on campus to a level that corresponds to the percentage of Aboriginal people residing in the province (University of Alberta, *U of A Calendar*, 2000, Sec. 14.1.1). According to demographics, Aboriginal people are thought to account for 6% to 8% of the provincial population. This figure translates to an enrolment of about 1800 to 2400 Aboriginal students. Currently, there are approximately 1000 Aboriginal students attending the University of Alberta. The findings of this study will assist the University of Alberta and other post-secondary educational institutions in creating an environment that is more respectful of and responsive to the needs of Indigenous students and simultaneously conducive to their reaching their educational goals.

Post-secondary education is one means of developing the human resource capacity that First Nations require for the improvement of our communities. Self government strategies are dependent, in part, on the educational and professional development of individuals. There is a need for Aboriginal teachers, nurses, engineers, lawyers, politicians, business leaders, and researchers, to develop the skills required in order to create self sufficient and functioning communities. This need, in light of the limited educational funding to support students, makes it imperative that the Aboriginal community understand the experience of its students in order to better support their possibility of success.

Knowledge of the personal experience of Aboriginal student graduates may be helpful for prospective post-secondary students. Being aware of the nature of such an experience will decrease the culture shock and increase their likelihood of success. It is hoped that this study will be of equal use to students who are currently enrolled in post secondary education. Presently, many students are ill prepared: emotional problems while attending post-secondary school include "coming to grips with First Nations Identity" (Archibald et al., 1995, p.45). Responding to these various needs will ultimately improve retention rates by improving the quality of students' lives, thereby allowing Aboriginal people to continue their journeys towards healing and self sufficiency.

During the time that I attended university, it was not clear to me that my feelings and experience were shared by others. I believe that when we are in the middle of an experience, especially one involving stress and confusion, it is not possible to achieve clarity, to identify how we feel and what we think. We must complete the experience and reflect on it to describe the experience as a whole, and equally important, to understand its purpose in our lives. I hope that the findings of this study will be helpful in clarifying some aspects of the post-secondary student experience, and therefore, further support the success of current and future students.

The findings of this study may contribute in a more general way to the perceptions and knowledge of Aboriginal people. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) note, "there are matters that need to be written. ... [O]nce they are heard, then written, voices that were previously silenced can speak as agents of social change and personal destiny" (p.207). Racism continues to be an issue in Canadian society (Boyko, 1995) and therefore, because educational institutions train and mould a large proportion of the future leaders in this country, they are fertile ground for change.

The design of this study incorporates the talking circle as a central research activity. That was motivated after considering a number of alternative ways of seeking and documenting information from the people who are the focus of the study. There are two areas of possible methodological significance from the research strategy adopted in this study. First, the study incorporates a specific research strategy, and thus contributes to a literature that deals specifically with talking circles. Second, it exemplifies an attempt to find direction for all aspects of research—from specific methods to general theory about research—in the traditions taught by the Elders.

Researcher Bias and Assumptions

Qualitative research is not value or bias-free (Janesick, 1994; Olesen, 1994; Patton, 1990; Scheper-Hughes, 1992). The questions we pose and seek to answer are arrived at and driven by personal thoughts, ideas, perspectives and experiences. My interest in this research topic, for example, arises out of my journey as an Aboriginal student. Fundamentally, it is impossible for us to fully rid ourselves of cultural or personal ways of interpreting the world. Awareness of personal assumptions and biases is

therefore critical, and with this in mind, I have identified the following as possible influences on this research/study:

- Different, sometimes conflicting, worldviews exist between Aboriginal and Western European cultures.
- Universities are predominantly based on a Western European worldview.
- The history/process of colonization was detrimental to Aboriginal people in Canada.
- All Aboriginal people have experienced loss to some degree.
- Aboriginal peoples are marginalized in Canadian society.
- Aboriginal graduates are the most reliable source of information concerning the Aboriginal post-secondary experience.

Although researcher bias is inevitable, it need not be viewed as a detriment or a weakness, especially when a researcher's preconceptions are acknowledged and made explicit. In fact, I agree with Olesen (1994), who sees personal bias as a possible resource to be held and utilized to advantage: "if the researcher is sufficiently reflexive about her project, she can evoke these personal biases as resources to guide data gathering for creating and for understanding her own interpretations and behaviour in the research" (p.165). In short, my own experiences allow a deeper insight into the world of Aboriginal students and graduates and provide a useful guide to the posing of relevant questions and to the interpretation of data.

Delimitations

This study focuses on the university experience of Aboriginal women with a specific interest in cultural identity. It does not attempt to understand or to explain identity in terms of formal psychological theory. A review of competing or complementary theories on identity development is outside the scope of this research study.

This study focused on Aboriginal women because they comprise the greater percentage of the Aboriginal student population at the University of Alberta, and because, having more in common with that group I had easier access to, and more interaction with, potential women participants. I believe that being an Aboriginal woman aided in the

rapport and trust building process and allowed the women to share personal thoughts and feelings about their experiences.

Limitations

This research is limited to a qualitative or interpretative methodology. Quantitative research tools would have added another dimension to the study.

This study is designed as a documentation of the complex nature of the self-reported experiences of one group of female Aboriginal students at the University of Alberta. Their experiences, however, cannot be said to represent the experiences of all, or most, female Aboriginal students at the University of Alberta; the women in the study do not speak for female Aboriginal students at other universities and certainly they cannot speak for all female university students.

The study data were gathered from Aboriginal women over a three month period, and therefore, it is retrospective and does not have longitudinal scope.

The application of talking circles as a research method for this study may be seen as a limitation in that it includes the stories of only eight Aboriginal women; however, this method was deliberately chosen for its inherent capability to uncover the 'depth' of participants' personal feelings rather than to seek a wider breadth of superficial responses for the purpose of generalization.

Although the prior educational experiences of the women and subsequent employment experiences were relevant to the topic of identity, data analysis was limited to their post secondary experiences while attending the University of Alberta. This fact limits the scope of this study.

Finally, this study does not focus on students who are currently attending university or on those who withdrew before completing an undergraduate degree, nor, consequently, for reasons for withdrawal. Although I think it is important to study both current students and the large group of people who withdraw, their experiences are beyond the scope of this research.

Research Method

The choice of research method was an important aspect of this study. I believe that a study seeking to understand Aboriginal experience must utilize a method that is congruent with Aboriginal community traditions and values. I wished to utilize a method that would be non-obtrusive and meaningful to the participants.

Talking Circles are a traditional form of group communication that involve prayer, ceremony, and "the sharing of mutually beneficial bits of information" (Deyhle, Hess & LeCompte, 1992, p.627). I have participated in many Aboriginal talking circles and found that they create an environment of mutual trust, respect, and caring for participants. Talking circles, therefore, appear to be well suited to this study. The problem is the scarcity of information concerning the use of talking circles in research. Consequently, the first phase of this research was to assess the appropriateness of talking circles as a component of a distinctively Indigenous research design. The first phase provided clear direction to proceed; the second phase was to convene talking circles to gather the data.

The research essentially consisted of two stages. First, a group of nine individuals joined with the researcher in a talking circle to assist with the development of a protocol for engaging in a traditional talking circle with the clear intent of having this group of participants become collaborators in the development and documentation of ideas. I refer to those circles in which the protocols were affirmed as Guidance Circles. Based on the direction provided in the Guidance Circles, a research method was designed and applied to a second series of talking circles for the purpose of hearing the stories (collecting the research data) of eight Aboriginal women. A manifest purpose was to make a record of what was said, and that record was to form the main body of text data. Those circles are referred to as Story Gathering Circles.

Some qualification of terminology might be useful here. The talking circle is not a research method as such, though I have adapted and applied them in that way. In this work I discuss the way in which talking circles have been employed to "collect data" and I assess that "use" as a "method." That is a handy way to describe the process but it may be somewhat misleading. The best way to describe the focal place of talking circles in this project is to say that in designing research, the inclusion of talking circles in a

research project might be considered if the research question allows or motivates that inclusion. The research question for this project motivates a research strategy that respectfully invites collaborative address from the people about whom the question is asked.

Organization of the Thesis

Chapter Two is a review of relevant literature. The first section is a presentation of Aboriginal worldview and provides a conceptual framework necessary to the subsequent section concerning Indigenous people and higher education. A third and final section reviews selected literature, including several studies and books of particular relevance to the topic of identity.

Chapter Three is concerned with methodology and begins with a brief look at perceptions widely held by many people in Aboriginal communities concerning the topic of research. This chapter also discusses qualitative methodology and provides an overview of talking circles: their nature, history and principles. A description of the Guidance Circles and the process of designing the research method are included.

'Gathering the Stories', Chapter Four, is a detailed description of data collection, or the story gathering circle process including three composite profiles of the eight women participants that allow the reader to garner a sense of the study participants. The final section in Chapter Four 'Towards Understanding' presents the method of data analysis and the criteria for evaluating the outcome.

Chapter's Five, Six and Seven constitute the data analysis. 'Now That I'm Here' begins the thematic analysis and presentation of the women's stories during the initial stages of university. At this stage, *Being in Awe, Being Disillusioned, Being Confused and Being Alone* emerge as the significant experiential themes. Chapter Six, 'This Is About Me' is concerned with the middle stage of the university experience. Here, the themes of *Learning the Truth, Feeling the Pain, Being Angry and Finding Support* describe the women's experience. *Finding Understanding, Finding Voice, Finding My Self and Finding Wholeness* emerge as the experiential themes throughout the remaining years on campus and are the subject of Chapter Seven, 'Finding My Place'.

Finally, Chapter Eight provides a summary of the findings and a thorough discussion of my own reflections as they pertain to the findings and as they relate to the earlier review of the literature. This chapter ends with a series of recommendations.

CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Our worldview is the lens through which we perceive, identify, and articulate who we are, including our experience of post-secondary education. Many authors agree that while it is important to understand that each First Nation has its own set of traditions, beliefs, and values, some elements of worldview are widely accepted by all Aboriginal people in North America and differ significantly from the Western worldview (e.g., McCormick, 1995; Nagel, 1996; Weber-Pillwax, 1999). Therefore, during my search for literature relevant to this study, it became apparent that I would need to begin this chapter with a discussion of Aboriginal worldview. Knowledge and the way that experience is formulated are functions of worldview defined as "that which provides the basic assumptions and the total attitude of life" (Polkinghorne, 1983, p.28).

This review of the literature accepts the premise that differences exist between Western and Aboriginal worldviews. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada. RCAP, 1996) for example, describes the Western worldview in this way: "Western societies, grounded as they are in a linear view ... seek understanding in terms of continuums, opposites and specific categories. The linear approach to knowledge leads one to think of isolated causes and effects, of what happened in what order" (p.114). The same report describes Aboriginal worldview, on the other hand, as a "relational approach to knowledge [that] sees the relationship among things as well as the unity and integrity of things. Such a way of seeing is called holistic" (p. 115).

These aspects of worldview, and other differences, are elaborated by numerous authors including Kevin Foley (1997), who emphasizes the clash between Aboriginal and Western peoples that occurs as a result of differing worldviews:

> [Columbus] came with a European manner of thinking – looking at the land, seeing something that is unique, and seeking to obtain it as a possession. This is adverse to Native American thought. With Indian people there is interdependence with everything in the universe. If an Indian person finds something precious, it is accepted as it is, rather than seeking more of it. ...If I don't see that I am part of a rock or a tree, or a part of Mother Earth, I can objectify it and make it separate from me. ...I can control it, manipulate it, deplete it. (p.144)

The first section of this chapter presents a discussion of those aspects of Aboriginal worldview that repeatedly arise in the literature and that are relevant to the

study topic. The aspects highlighted include the interconnectedness of life, spirituality and community.

The second section of the literature review, 'Indigenous Peoples and Post-Secondary education', explores the impact of Aboriginal worldview and identity on our experience of being students at a post-secondary institution. Here, the discussion builds on the previous themes: holistic interconnectedness and education, spirituality and education, and community and education. This section is followed by a discussion of 'living in two worlds' as one way of understanding the experience of post-secondary education for Aboriginal students.

A third and final section, 'selected literature', elaborates more fully on work that holds theoretical and methodological significance for this study. Empirical research in Aboriginal post-secondary education reviews two Canadian studies. 'Aboriginal student Perspectives' and 'Aboriginal Women and Identity' are discussions of selected works by Aboriginal authors.

Aboriginal Worldview

This section is organized according to those aspects most frequently identified in the literature on Aboriginal people's worldview; holistic interconnectedness, spirituality and community guide the discussion of those aspects that are especially relevant to this study. Although each aspect is part of and inseparable from the whole, each will be examined in turn for the purpose of discussion.

Holistic Interconnectedness and Worldview

> *The interconnection between human being and the stars, sun, moon, and Earth is what ties our being with the creation and the Creator. We are all a part of the whole. We are not separate. We are as tied to the earth below our feet as we are to the sun that is shining on us now. We are part of a whole that is tremendous. It is incredible! (Trafzer, 1997, p.207)*

A discussion of Aboriginal worldview must begin with an understanding that all things in life are connected – plants, animals, rocks, wind, and humans (Duran and Duran, 1995; Gunn-Allen, 1992; Hampton, 1995a, 1995b; Smith, 1999). We are taught that there is spirit in all of 'creation' and that in order to live peacefully and in harmony,

we must respect and recognize that spirit as a part of ourselves. 'Holistic' is a way of naming this over-riding notion of interconnectedness.

This topic of interconnectedness always reminds me of the wise and simple words spoken by a Lakota Elder in a university graduate class. Lionel Kinunwa, reflecting on the problems involving youth and crime today, said that youth are missing -- because it has been lost through the deconstruction of our traditional society values -- the knowledge or understanding that all things have spirit and purpose – the deer, the tree, even the blade of grass. Kinunwa believed that today's youth need to re-learn the value of life as it exists for Indigenous people because, he said "the only difference between us and other forms of 'creation' is in the shadow we cast" (personal communication, 1998).

Since everything and everyone is interconnected, each of us is accountable to and responsible for developing and maintaining relationships with each part and with the whole of life. Human beings, for example, cannot survive without air, food, and water, and therefore we need to care for and be in relationship with these and other aspects of life. Each human being, by definition, is also dependent on others. I am a 'nobody' without relatives. A family and a community are essential aspects of life and constitute a further set of responsibilities. In addition to being related to everything and everyone, we are accountable to the past and responsible for our future.

Past, present, and future are included in the concept of interconnectedness. We are connected to the past through the Elders and ancestors who have gone on before and live in the spirit world. We are connected to the future by our relationship with children and the maintenance of what they will need in order to have a future. Our knowledge and understanding of history and our visions and dreams for the future also connect us to time in a holistic way.

Holistic interconnectedness is also used in reference to the individual 'self' as a unity comprised of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual parts (Tafoya, 1995; Wilson, 1996). Emotionally, people have feelings of joy, sadness, and anger. Emotional well-being involves respecting our own and other's emotions and feeling safe enough to express them in appropriate ways. The mental part of the 'self' refers to the capacity of the mind to apply creativity and independent thinking to the decisions we face in our lives. We are curious and require intellectual stimulation to expand our minds and be

whole. The spiritual aspect includes our values and a core identity reflected through relationships with our families and communities. It is also the spiritual level that allows us to be connected with our ancestors through ceremony. The physical aspect refers to our body and the need for food, shelter, and clothing. Our body is also the vehicle by which we act out our emotional, intellectual, and spiritual decisions.

Although the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual are important to consider separately in any learning or experiential situation, we "must not separate mental and emotional from physical and spiritual" (Lightning, 1993, p.200). Each part of the self, in other words, is interconnected with the whole 'self', being inseparable and, therefore one. Complete integration of "all parts of the person – mental, physical, emotional and spiritual – is important on the journey so that we can fully participate in life" (Assembly of First Nations Health Commission, 1994, p.55).

An additional and related aspect of the Aboriginal worldview is the philosophy of harmony and balance. Whereas both balance and harmony imply equality, harmony also includes, and in fact, requires the absence of conflict. For example, a strong and positive relationship between two people might not be equal in authority, knowledge or responsibility, but it still can be achieved and endure in harmony if there is respect for the interdependence of all things in life.

Maintaining balance between the parts of our self and with all things in our environment is an important aspect of Aboriginal worldview; that idea contradicts the Western "ideology that conflict is universal and natural to human society" (Monture-Angus, 1996, p.101). A Darwinian theory of 'survival of the fittest', premised on competition, superiority and conflict is, "ridiculous to Aboriginal people who believe that harmony is the centre of our relations with the universe and all their beings, be they human, animals or plant" (Monture-Angus, 1996, p.101).

The concepts of interconnectedness, harmony, and balance can be illustrated by the notion of Aboriginal restorative justice. Restorative justice is a system whereby federal and provincial justice officials and Aboriginal leaders collaboratively address judicial issues by developing culturally inclusive and appropriate ways to restore the individual to wholeness with themselves and with their community. According to Aboriginal people, "deviant behaviour is something that requires healing – not only for

the person committing the crime, but for everyone involved" (Large, 2001, p. 23). Such a view rests on the Aboriginal belief that all things are connected and interdependent, and justice therefore involves healing or restoration of the mental, emotional, spiritual and physical parts of the self. As well, it involves the idea of re-integration into, and involvement of, the whole community in the justice process: "separations of law, government, family, education, religion etc., simply do not exist with the Aboriginal worldview" (Monture-Angus, 1996, p.101).

In place of a presiding judge or jury having full responsibility for an 'accused' person's fate, restorative justice involves the whole community in the decisions about individuals who have come in conflict with the law. A series of circles involves the accused and their relatives, the victims of the crime and their family, and community members who are considered co-victims. Each of the parties has the opportunity to affect the outcome or the consequence of the injustice. In this way, balance and harmony within the community can be restored and the principle of interconnectedness honoured.

This discussion of holistic interconnectedness would be incomplete without attention to the behavioural rules that flow from the principles of interconnectedness, harmony, and balance. A code of ethics, so to speak, is partially implied in the discussion of restorative justice and elaborated by Clare Brant, an Aboriginal psychiatrist (cited in Wilson, 1996). While restorative justice addresses behavioural ethics in a situation in which the community and individuals are faced with disharmony, Wilson's work describes the behavioural ethics evident in a situation of harmony and balance.

In her address of this issue, Wilson, a Cree woman studying at Harvard, begins by identifying *non-interference* as a behavioural ethic embedded in the belief that while everyone is equal, individual learning occurs in different ways and at different times. Therefore, in order not to disturb the overall balance, one should not interfere with another person's learning. The ethic that *anger should not be shown* speaks of the need to display little in the way of emotions, an idea which demonstrates again the importance of not disturbing harmony and balance. In other words, "one does not burden others with one's own personal emotional stress" (A. Wilson, 1996, p.307). *Respecting Praise and Gratitude* implies that calling attention to one person singles him or her out which is in opposition to the inter-connected and equality of each person's place in society. The

Conservation-Withdrawal Tactic emphasizes that thinking things through before voicing or acting on ideas provides for a well-calculated preservation of energy and again preserves balance and harmony. In addition, the behavioural ethic that *Time must be right* refers to the notion that one must prepare emotionally and spiritually for a chosen course of action in order to minimize personal mistakes and subsequently, disturbances in family and community life (p.307).

Finally, the holistic interconnectedness of all things is sometimes referred to as the Sacred Circle wherein all of creation exists equally and interdependently (Gunn-Allen, 1992; Hanohano, 1999; Ross, 1996; Sioui, 1995). The concept of the circle will be returned to and elaborated on in a later discussion on talking circles as a research method. At this time, the discussion on Aboriginal worldview moves on to the aspect of spirituality.

Spirituality and Worldview

> *To be human among the Indians is to be spiritual. To be spiritual among the Europeans is to transcend the human world. They have said that they are separate from the Creator. So that which is spiritual cannot be human. From an Indian perspective, that is bizarre! (Cordero, 1997, p.85)*

Spirituality is central to Native people (Smith, 1999). Spirituality speaks to the core of who we are and is difficult to discuss in isolation from the other aspects of our worldview since it permeates all other aspects. Spirituality is not limited to, and indeed, may not be a part of an institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs and practices. It is a way of life that acknowledges the existence of 'spirit' in all creation and builds prayer into life and everything we do (Canada. RCAP, 1996, Vol. 1, p.617).

Crozier-Hogle and Wilson (1997) credit the spiritual aspect with the very survival of our way of life:

> A special quality of spirit runs like a golden thread among the expressions of those Indians who have remained close to their traditions, ceremonies, and ancient wisdom. This closeness keeps alive and nourishes a belief in an Invisible power, a power that has many manifestations and names – Great Spirit, Great Wonder, Wakan Tanka, Creator. It engenders a sense of relatedness to all of life and the earth. ...It is also a source of the power that has given them the strength to survive. (p. xiv)

This notion that spirit exists in all of life's creation is not a difficult concept to grasp for those raised with their native language because the concept of spirituality is embedded in Aboriginal languages. For instance, most American Aboriginal languages differentiate grammatically between animate and inanimate objects/words, and there are many more objects referred to as animate than in Indo-European languages. Rock (*mistasiniy*) and pipe (*ospwaakan*) in the Cree language, for example, are considered to be animate, consistent with an underlying assumption that they have life and spirit. Whether the rock itself is the entire Rocky Mountains or the tiniest of stones, I have been taught to refer to all rocks as having the spirit of our 'grandfathers'. In the same way, I refer to the moon as my 'grandmother' spirit. This way of seeing and experiencing the world is widely accepted in an Aboriginal worldview: Graveline (1998) says that "we share a belief in, knowledge of and respect for unseen powers. ... [that] are found in all Earth's creatures: rocks and crystals, birds and feathers, trees and wood, plants, animals and humans" and goes on to say that, while "some would question that this power is mysterious, most traditional Aboriginal people would think of [it] as natural" (p.52).

The notion of earthly forms being imbued with spirit, and interconnected as a whole, results in values, attitudes and behaviour, indeed a way of life, that contrast with the Western worldview in which spirituality and spirit are understood to be something other than, or beyond, the earthly and human world (Cordero, 1995; Deloria, 1994). As someone born to parents from two distinct cultural backgrounds, Indigenous and Western, I found it necessary to reflect on the spiritual differences. I chose to follow the cultural ways of my Aboriginal mother because the spiritual dimension in her worldview ultimately gave meaning to all aspects of my life. Others, including Thorpe (1997), have been faced with the same challenge by virtue of being born with mixed heritage:

> I am fair and light-complected and could have chosen to live my life either in mainstream America or the life which I have. I have chosen to align myself with the world view of native people. The reason I made that choice is that Native thinking embraces spirituality. The foundations of Native thinking are based on spirituality – that dimension which connects us to each other as human beings and to life as a whole. (p.4)

Aboriginal spirituality, as implied by Thorpe's words, is inclusive of a relationship to the earth itself as a living entity. This premise is universally accepted by

Aboriginal people and adds a significant variation to the difference between the Western and Indigenous worldview:

> The earth is our mother. We believe that. I've met indigenous people from around the world and I've yet to find a difference of opinion on that. It's much more than a saying, it's much more than a word, it's a real compassion and longevity (Chief Oren Lyons, 1997, p.15).
>
> The most fundamental clash [with the Western worldview]...stems from a belief held by indigenous peoples that the earth is a living entity, Mother Earth. From this belief indigenous values and practices, social structures and relations are derived, which place indigenous views in direct opposition to Western values. (Smith, 1999, p.99)

The Earth as our mother is a concept that I first heard spoken by Elders at the Indian Ecumenical conference in the Rocky Mountains of Southern Alberta during the early 1970s. Each summer, hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people from across North America gathered to listen to many Elders share their wisdom. It was during these gatherings that I first realized and understood my own connection to my ancestors and to the earth as a living entity. During the conference, we lived in tipis, woke each morning to a sunrise ceremony and spent the daytime hours listening to teachings about the land, the sun, the moon and creation. I sat on the earth during the day, slept on her at night, and learned the value of her as 'Mother' – giver of life. These teachings provided me with a foundation in traditional knowledge.

Today, the concept of Mother Earth is recognizable and familiar to both Native and non-Native people, especially to those working in the environmental movement. Unfortunately, it is now so familiar that it approaches being a cliché. Nevertheless, the underlying meaning remains essential and must be respected.

The association to the land as a maternal entity is taken for granted by those who grew up on a reserve and who associate their upbringing and early life with a designated 'place' that is 'Indian'. It is our traditional lands and territory "to which we are inextricably bound", which are the source of our "spiritual life" and form the "framework for [our] cultural identity" (Jordan, 1986, p.276). It is the familiar and concrete, people and daily habits that lend themselves to the creation of identity. In other words, being and belonging to a particular territory "creates the sense of place that is so crucial to Indian

well-being, [and] explains why the loss of so much of their land" has had a devastating impact on Aboriginal people. (Crozier-Hogle & Wilson, p. xiv)

In a more general way, Pardilla (1997) describes this notion of the earth as a sacred container of identity: "This land is part of us. When you walk on the earth here, you're walking on the spiritual home of my ancestors...I'm not going to go and indiscriminately gouge out the earth and exploit it. I'm here to live with it" (p.201). And Hampton (1995b) elaborates on the spiritual significance of land, or the earth, by extending the concept of identity over generations:

> My son, wiggling his toes in the mud, reminds me of eternity and time. Eternity, because I know the feel of it in the mud between my toes. Time because the child I once was I still am – taught by the elder I may be. ...Generations of children our mother earth has borne. Her well being is our grand children's future. (p.39)

I recall another story that I heard told by Stan Wilson during the First Biannual Indigenous Scholars' Conference at the University of Alberta in 1995. Dr. Wilson passionately described an experience he had while attending a conference in the southern United States. He imagined himself standing on that land ten thousand years ago and envisioned his ancestors who must have walked, lived, and died right where he stood. He described being overcome by the feeling that he was "walking on sacred ground [because] their remains would be in the soil...enriching it in the process." From his point of view, the ancestors give nourishment to the grass, the tree, to the " worm that lives on the leaf of the tree, [and] to the bird that eats the worm". Consequently, "when you go by yourself into the woods, you are not alone. You are there with the birds. You are there with the trees. You are there with the grass. You are there with your ancestors" (p.63).

To review briefly, spirituality is the core of an Aboriginal worldview. It defines our connections to self, to family, and to community; and to the past, present, and future. In essence, spirituality is the life force and the life source on which all else resides. Within Aboriginal worldview, furthermore, the earth is understood as the mother or foundation of life. Spirituality and the earth are inseparable. More specifically, the territorial lands of an Aboriginal people are especially sacred in that they have traditionally defined our identity, the place we belong to and the place that belongs to us. Today, traditional lands remain spiritually important for many Aboriginal people as the place from which we come and to which we will return in order to join our ancestors.

Community and Worldview

The definition of Aboriginal community is varied and multi-layered. The term 'Indian Country' refers to an Aboriginal community and can be a physical location such as a First Nation or a Metis Settlement. Indian country can also refer to an Aboriginal office, a pow wow, or other social events, or locations where Aboriginal people gather. And community is used in reference to a specific nationhood such as Cree, Dene or Metis. The term community also encompasses "a state of mind, a spiritual belief" (Smith 1999, p.126). In short, Aboriginal community has multiple definitions and meanings.

I participate in and consider myself to be a member of many communities within communities. For example, I belong to the wider-reaching community of Aboriginal people across Canada who meet and try to deal with issues of importance in our collective struggle to survive and improve the lives of our people. I am also a member of my First Nation community, the Aboriginal community in Edmonton, the Aboriginal community on the University of Alberta campus, and the community of Aboriginal scholars across North America. And finally, I am a member of a smaller community comprised of fellow classmates in the First Nations' Graduate Education Program and an even smaller community circle of close family and friends. Other ways of defining community include a 'spiritual community' and a 'sober community'.

And when I reflect further, I realize that the term 'community' assumes a different personal meaning in those associations that exclude Aboriginal people. For example, I do not feel ownership or a sense of belonging to the neighborhood where I live, to the city of Edmonton as a whole, or to the non-Aboriginal segments of the University of Alberta campus. In short, the term 'community' denotes many things, but most importantly, it denotes personal relationships and a sense of where I belong.

Aboriginal cultures place high value on community or collective association. The belief is that it is not possible for a 'self' to exist separately from the group or community, but must rather exist in relation to it (Tierney, 1992). Said another way, the "traditional worldview is one which emphasizes the spiritual dimension and the self embedded in community" (Katz & St. Denis, 1991, p.33). Traditionally, Aboriginal individuals do not seek to differentiate themselves or stand apart from their group or communities. Instead, an Aboriginal individual recognizes "the group as relatives included in his or her own

identity" (Battiste & Barman, 1995, p.ix). The outcome is a strong interdependence between the individual and the community and an understanding that individuals are responsible for contributing to and maintaining this relationship:

> Aboriginal traditionalists have long recognized the link between individual responsibility and community well-being. The knowledge that each person is responsible for his or her actions in relation to the larger community is a fundamental shared belief. Self in relation is linked to a tribal worldview and is very important in the formation of an Aboriginal identity. (Graveline, 1998, p.57)

An understanding of community also presumes a relationship between spiritual, physical, emotional and intellectual aspects. In the same way that a whole and harmonious self is comprised of these parts, "this too is true for the entire community". In those instances in which one aspect "is missing" or out of balance "the entire community will suffer in some way" (Wilson 1996, p.308). For example, the well-being of a community is impacted by physical aspects such as poverty, inadequate housing, including poor sanitation, and other health-related factors such as addictions. The absence of spirituality in a community or the conflict that exists between religious groups affects community well being. Abandoning or forgetting the spirit of the community leads to "wounding" and results in "peoples loss of identity and their connection to themselves, their families, and their communities" (Assembly of First Nations, 1994, p.148). Mental or intellectual aspects of a community include political leadership. If that leadership is divided or oppressive in nature to its people, conflict and the absence of harmony and balance with the community result. Specific leadership functions such as those related to education and employment opportunities can also be negatively impacted. Finally, emotional aspects of a community are evident in the level of safety that its members feel about expressing themselves honestly. The well-being of the community depends on the honest and open involvement of its members.

As demonstrated above, community weakness or conflict in one or more of the physical, mental, emotional or spiritual aspects contributes to an imbalance in and the disharmony of the entire community. Community wholeness and interconnectedness are intrinsic to Aboriginal worldview, which is based on respect, cooperation and the responsibility of the members for each other and the whole.

To summarize, an individual within the Aboriginal worldview does not exist as an independent entity from his or her community. In other words, individual identity is whole to the extent that it is connected to a community identity. Contributing to the development and maintenance of a harmonious and balanced community comprised of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects is of paramount concern to Aboriginal people (Duran & Duran, 1995).

Indigenous Peoples and Post-Secondary Education

> *Aboriginal education has a responsibility to uphold a worldview based on recognizing and affirming wholeness and to disseminate the benefits to all humanity. (Ermine, 1996, p.110)*

The following section is not an exhaustive review of the research undertaken or reports written in the area of post-secondary education and Aboriginal students. Where reports of this nature do exist, they are often part of confidential institutional papers with limited distribution (Archibald et al., 1995). The discussion is primarily concerned with literature that addresses those aspects of identity or worldview presented earlier, namely holistic interconnectedness, spirituality, and community. A discussion of the reality of living in two worlds as the outcome of being an Aboriginal student in a post-secondary institution concludes the discussion of Indigenous peoples and post-secondary education.

Holistic Interconnectedness and Education

Western theories of identity development do not apply easily to an Aboriginal worldview. The first reason returns the discussion to Wilson's (1996) point that these theories are, for the most part, cognitive models in that they address the self as a series of primarily 'mental' occurrences. Furthermore, Wilson argues that the emphasis on individuality glosses over the significant relationship between self and community. In fact, the Aboriginal worldview goes beyond a collective community, to include all life forms in the universe as essential aspects of individual identity: "Unique to the psyche of Aboriginal people is their sense of oneness with the world around them...and consciousness that gives life-like qualities to all" (Duran as cited in Wyrostock, 1997, p.56).

Participating in an educational environment, and more specifically a university, which reflects a Western worldview and theories of identity therefore results in the

alienation of the Aboriginal self (Barrette, 1995, Haig-Brown, 1995; Wood 1996). For example, Fox (1996) contends that "University is based on a powerful, but extremely narrow conception of thinking and communicating compared to traditional ways of thinking and communication (p.6). In this and other ways discussed in the earlier section on Aboriginal worldview, Aboriginal students attending university join a world that does not make sense to them. They do not see themselves reflected anywhere in their environment. They cannot feel safe or confident and their sense of self is eroded.

The conflict between worldviews and the dominance of the Western worldview in post-secondary education results in "...education [being] used to wipe out [the] identity, language, culture, [and] philosophy" of Aboriginal students (Hampton, 1995a, p.52). I agree with the argument that issues of worldview and identity are significant and deserving of attention.

Aboriginal people writing about their experience at university invariably use the terms 'isolation', 'alienation' and 'painful' (Monture-Angus, 1996). Attending post-secondary institutions results in culture shock for Aboriginal students. In fact, research reveals that the above issues more frequently result in Aboriginal students' failure than academic performance (Indian Nations At Risk Task Force, 1990). I have also found this to be true in the counselling and advising of Aboriginal students. The issues they present are often related to personal difficulties with what is being taught, with how they are expected to think, write, and interact within the existing structures of the university (Canada. RCAP, 1996).

One of the most common examples used to describe how Aboriginal students face conflict that is related to identity and worldview is classroom lectures and discussions involving Aboriginal people, their history, and their societies. My own university experiences in this area were often painful. I recall one Sociology class in particular in which the professor spent an entire class describing his work with an Indigenous group of people in South America. I found it offensive to listen to him speak about his fear of these 'backward people' who did not understand the concept of personal belongings and whom he therefore perceived as inferior to himself. From my point of view, he had no right to assign value to a worldview he obviously did not understand. In retrospect, I consider myself fortunate to have had the understanding and confidence to hold to my

point of view. Had I not been able to do so, my sense of self would have been, at best, confused, and at worst, diminished. This experience and others of a similar nature reported to me by students bring to mind Te Hennepe's (1993) comments on anthropology classes as "political sites producing frustration, humiliation, confusion and rage" (p.199).

The discussion of Aboriginal and Western worldviews in the literature exposed some of the personal challenges that Aboriginal students face while attending university and some of the ways that identity and/or worldview factor into their experiences. A Western model of education that limits itself to intellectual learning can be a source of conflict for Aboriginal students who value a holistic learning model inclusive of the mental, physical, emotional, and the spiritual parts of ourselves and of life.

Spirituality and Education

> *People are not allowed to be Indians and cannot become whites. They have been educated, as the old-timers would say, to think with their heads instead of their hearts (Vine Deloria Jr, 1994:242, also cited in Graveline, 1998, p.21)*

The Canadian government considered education, and especially residential schools, as the most efficient route to assimilate Native people. These policies, to varying degrees, resulted in the loss of Aboriginal people's identities, history, and spiritual knowledge (Longboat as cited in Hanohano, 1999). As mentioned earlier, spirituality is foundational to our identity and must therefore be considered an important aspect of education: "Among Indigenous people, education and spirituality are closely linked." (Katz & St. Denis, 1991, p.26). Education for Aboriginal people includes reaching back into the past to understand how we have come to be the people we are today. The past holds wisdom and direction for the future. Education must develop self knowledge and discipline about the individual's role and place in a human community. Education also teaches each her place in a community comprised of all earthly life and what is beyond. Akan (1992), reporting a Saulteaux Elder's teachings, supports this claim concerning education:

> education should involve self-examination and that which makes connection to our old ways of knowing, education should be rich in a spiritual sense first. If it is not spiritual, it is not good education, spiritual and emotional aspects of personal

> development must not be neglected -- or forgotten; education is a spiritual process. (p.207)

Hanohano (1999), a fellow student in the First Nations Graduate Education Program, argues that the absence of spirituality in Western education policies and practices is the core of the crisis in Aboriginal education today: "If education is truly to be transformed for Native people, then the challenge for our institutions, and for educators, is to find ways for these practices and beliefs to become a normal part of the educational experience" (p.218).

My own experience at Nechi Institute, an Aboriginal Training centre located in St. Albert, Alberta, serves to illustrate the importance of holistic and spiritually-based education. After completing my undergraduate degree, I enrolled in an Addictions Counsellor Training course at Nechi Institute where, in addition to the intellectual aspects of the curricula, emotional, physical and spiritual elements were included in the overall teaching model. For example, each morning began with a prayer and sweetgrass ceremony. Time was set aside for what was called "Where Are We" sessions which consisted of a talking circle for individuals to express emotional issues that accompanied the learning experience. Community and relationship building was essential to nurturing individual expressions of emotional, mental and spiritual learning which are the cornerstone of Nechi's educational philosophy. Time and care were taken early in the program to build a sense of collective belonging and identity. Traditional ceremonies such as pipe ceremonies and sweat lodge ceremonies were promoted but not compulsory. Information was presented through lectures and readings with extensive time allowed for discussion. Ground rules for communication were established early in the process that emphasized acceptance of and respect for divergent values. Trainees, as we were called, came from many different nations, covered a wide age range, and subscribed to widely different spiritual traditions, including Christianity. I recall completing that training experience with the feeling that I had learned and integrated the knowledge at a deeper level than had been possible for me during my years of attending university. I believe that teaching must include a spiritual and emotional element in order for complete learning to occur. I turn to Graveline (1998) in concluding this discussion on the importance of spirituality in education:

> In Aboriginal traditional forms, the spiritual infuses a person's entire existence within the world. A spiritual connection helps not only to integrate the self as a unified entity, but also to integrate the individual into the world as a whole. Spirituality is experienced as an ongoing process, allowing the individual to move towards experiencing connection -- to family, community, society and Mother Earth. (p.55)

Community and Education

> *Through building our connection to our Community, we gain insight into the reality that we are all part of the larger circle of life. Building and sustaining community was and is a deep concern to Aboriginal people. (Graveline 1998, p.162)*

The Western model of education is premised on individual competition or success. In contrast, the Aboriginal worldview does not separate individual and community identity, and the collective is valued as much as the individual. This worldview results in Aboriginal students' valuing collaborative and group accomplishment over individual achievement and recognition. In fact, individual competition is an aspect of post-secondary education that can interfere with Aboriginal student success (Haig-Brown, 1995). Eber Hampton (1995b) summarizes the relationship between education, community, and individuals in this way:

> Education is to serve the people. Its purpose is not individual advancement or status. ...There is an inevitable conflict between western education and Indian education on this point. The competitive success of the individual is an implicit value of western schools and, as such, is in direct conflict with the Indian value of group success through individual achievement. The Indian student enrolled in an Anglo [western] school, which not only exalts Anglo values but sets the individual in opposition to the group, will feel the conflict between being Indian and being educated. (p.21).

Hampton (1995b) believes that being educated in institutions that embody a Western worldview add a burden to Aboriginal students not experienced by other students. Aboriginal students, in other words, must find a way of sorting out differences between often conflicting worldviews and of integrating both in some way that is personally satisfying and that allows for their successful participation. At the same time, Aboriginal students are faced with their desire to and the responsibility of contributing to their communities in such a way so as not to bring disrespect to the Aboriginal way of life and worldview. To accomplish these complex and difficult ends, Hampton argues that "[t]he graduates of our schools must not only be able to survive in a white-dominated

society they must contribute to the change of that society" (p.41). The desire to impact mainstream society, and the desire to contribute to their community, are the reasons many Aboriginal people choose to attend university.

Tierney (1992), for example, notes that Aboriginal student aspirations beyond college are more altruistic or family-oriented than those of many of their Anglo counterparts (p.59). Battiste and Barman (1995) agree with the notion that Aboriginal students go to university for the greater good of the community in order that "my people may live and for all my relatives (p. viii). In fact, "99% of Indian students who come to school say that what they want to do is to be of service to [their] people" (Hampton, 1995b, p.21).

In the end, Aboriginal students require a sense of community in order to enhance learning (Canada. RCAP, 1996). Students look for programs in which they will feel welcome and gravitate to people who will listen and where they can find refuge from the dominant Western way of thinking and behaving (Astone & Nunez-Wormack, 1990). Family and community connections are important to the well being of Aboriginal students. They need to find and build those connections in post-secondary environments: "A sense of turf, a place that is Indian, a place where one is free to relax from the conventions of white society and be one's Native self is essential to well-being" (Hampton, 1995b, p.39).

Living in Two Worlds

> *My understanding of my Indian identity comes largely from my family, from my grandfather and my mother. I spent the early part of my life searching for my Indian identity, what it meant to be a mixed-blood and how to reconcile both worlds. It is not at all an easy task (Trafzer, 1997, p.209)*

The concept of 'living in two worlds' is a common theme in the literature. It refers to the experience of the mixed blood person who is born into two cultural heritages. In my life, for example, my father being of European descent, namely Scottish, and my mother being Ojibway, resulted in my being "a bit of both worlds" (Gunn-Allen, 1992, p.129). For much of my life, therefore, this left me feeling estranged from both the Aboriginal and mainstream worlds. Finding it difficult to belong to either the Aboriginal or the Western way of life resulted in my feeling that I belonged nowhere. As Gunn-Allen points out, half-breeds "commonly feel alien to themselves above all" (p.129). In

later years, when I chose to see the world through my mother's way of life, I found it difficult to fit into the mainstream community or institution:

> Indians are living in two worlds, and for them to keep their values and live in the white world has been very difficult. It's difficult for Indian people to assimilate by working for themselves, for promotions, for money. A lot of these things still go against the values of Indian people. (Foley, 1997, p.145)

The idea of inherent conflict that comes from trying to survive within two worlds is prevalent in the literature. Living in two worlds, or having a foot in each culture so to speak, can be a difficult and confusing way to be (Tierney, 1992, p.109).

Racism and the privileges that accrue with being born into and belonging to a Western worldview and predominantly Caucasian majority further prevent the full involvement of Aboriginals in Canadian society. Equality of opportunity and participation are seldom realized ideals for Aboriginal people in Canada (Breton, Isajiw, Kalbach & Reitz, 1990; Weiner, 2001). The same issues face Indigenous people in other parts of the world. Jordan (1986), for example, confirmed that Australian Aborigines also face rejection by mainstream Australian society and are left with "no possibility of a positive identity" (p.281).

Identity issues are inevitable for colonized people around the world. Colonial power, by definition, imposes a particular worldview, and at the same time, controls the institutions and resources necessary to both learning and participating in the colonizers' world. A colonized people are a people under siege. Their survival is often dependent on a capacity to withhold their participation in the colonizer's world and to hold silently to their worldview and their way of life. This tactic, as well as others, allows a colonized people to develop and maintain a sense of identity. The notion of having a strong primary identity, prior to acquiring, or being confronted with learning a second culture, is discussed by Parry (1982), for example, when she argues that a strong sense of self or identity as Aboriginal person can counterbalance the negative view that students face in university and other post-secondary institutions. Her rationale is that "the strength of a group identity buffers the stigmatized individual" (p.10). Maclean (1997) summarizes her own thoughts about individual-group identity in this way: "The basic thing I've come to realize is that a person needs a strong cultural identity. In order to venture into something

new and learn new things, they need a strong sense of their ties back to their ancestral knowledge and community" (p.183).

The issue of sacrificing primary identity in order to succeed at university is a further theme in the literature and relevant to the discussion of living in two worlds. The claim, for example, that "the more educated they [Aboriginal people] are, the less Indian they become" (Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, 1990, p.2), speaks to this notion of sacrifice and presumes that surrendering one's primary identity in order to be successful in Western post secondary institutions is necessary for success. Trueba, Spindler and Spindler (1989) describe this process of surrender and its consequences:

> Learning is associated with acculturation, [and] ultimately the loss of their distinctive ethnic and cultural identities.... [They feel] they must give up their minority identities, some call them 'wannabees' who act white and disassociate themselves from their identity and from peers. (p.131)

To what extent is sacrifice of identity a prevalent occurrence for Aboriginal students? And must identity as an Aboriginal student be sacrificed in order to succeed in a post- secondary environment? These are important questions that need to be examined.

Haig-Brown (1995) did an evaluation of an inner city education program in Vancouver, BC. She spoke with adult students who had attempted to attend university in the 1970's – a time when we were just beginning to see Aboriginal people on campuses in this country. A common perception that she noted was that our people were selling out by attending a mainstream university and buying into the "enemy's culture" (p.252).

LaFrance (1994) agrees that sacrificing personal identity is a difficult issue for Indigenous students, and at the same time, cautions against sacrificing identity as a way of achieving success: "Western schooling separates education from living, alienates us from our surroundings and therefore our culture.... [It is] extremely difficult to be educated in a western way and culturally remain who we are" (p.20).

Accomplishing the task of simultaneously retaining one's identity and participating in post-secondary education requires constant vigilance and effort. As Barrette (1995) notes, Aboriginal students are "pulled in opposite directions, caught between cultures, values and beliefs" and therefore "have to constantly be aware of the pressures of assimilation in order to retain a separate sense of identity" (p.102).

The real issue for students caught in the dilemma of 'living in two worlds' is formulated by the question "How can I be true to myself and true to my people?" (Monture-Angus, 1996, p.98). In addition to balancing their personal responsibilities of family and community with the intellectual demands of learning in the classroom and from books, Aboriginal students must find ways to bring the Aboriginal and Western worlds together in a way that has relevance and meaning for them. Difficulties arise when students are unable to merge new teachings with their existing knowledge base. Some may surrender their primary Aboriginal identity. Others may reject the Western system, including its institutions, and ways of thinking and behaving. The outcome of the latter choice is often anger, even hate. Cooper (1997) offers this advice to students facing this issue and others:

> I talk to them about walking in two worlds – being able to walk proudly as an Indian, and at the same time take the world as it is and use its resources to live a good life. ... You can get your Indian identity and develop a lot of hate for what has happened [colonization]. When I see Indian people who live with hate for the non-Indian world, I try to tell them, 'don't dwell there'. (p.118)

I agree with the above statement and with the views of others who argue that the resolution of worlds in conflict lies in a blending of both. Medicine (1995) concurs: "we have all lost some of our Native identity through enculturation processes at school. We must be able to learn in the larger society and work in the dominant society without losing our own identity" (p.45).

No one suggests that Aboriginal people can or should return to a previous era; however, Aboriginal people do not wish to completely abandon the cultural ways of their ancestors. I think that it is essential that we understand and bring forward principles of the Aboriginal worldview and way of life. I think that it is equally important that we find a way to integrate this knowledge and understanding with modern or mainstream education. We must find ways to blend the two worlds into a bicultural identity that leaves our Aboriginal pride and cultural integrity intact, while still allowing ourselves the right to embrace the skills necessary to survive and succeed in the dominant society (Barman, Herbert and McCaskill, 1986, as cited in Graveline, 1998, p.21)

This section presented examples from the literature that illustrate some of the ways in which worldview and identity is a significant issue in the discussion of

Aboriginal students' experiences at university. The thematic breakdown of Indigenous people and post-secondary education corresponds with the topics presented in the initial discussion on Aboriginal worldview: interconnectedness, spirituality and community. A final discussion on 'Living in Two Worlds' concludes this section. The review of literature now turns to those works of particular importance to this study. These authors and their writing stimulated, encouraged, and motivated my work.

Selected Literature

The discussion of selected literature begins with two empirical studies that were particularly relevant to the experience and identity of Aboriginal people in post-secondary education. These two studies, not unlike most studies addressing Aboriginal post-secondary education, link the failure of Aboriginal people within mainstream institutions to the processes and practices of colonization (Perley, 1993; Shortt, 1995; Smith, 1999; Teasdale & Teasdale, 1992; Young, 1996). These studies implicitly identify the need for universities and colleges to assume responsibility for facilitating a de-colonization process. In short, Archibald, et al. (1995) and Young (1996), the authors of the two studies to be reviewed below, undertook their research in order to facilitate institutional change.

This section also includes Aboriginal student perspectives found in a review of one book comprised of essays written by Indigenous graduates from a prestigious university in the Eastern United States. This collection of essays provides personal accounts of the university experience from the perspective of the students themselves, including its effect on their identity as Indigenous people. Finally, 'Aboriginal Women and Identity' reviews the work of an Aboriginal woman who examines identity development from a theoretical perspective and proposes ways to reclaim a sense of pride in being Aboriginal women.

Empirical Research in Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education

Archibald et al. (1995), in a study funded by the BC Ministry of Advanced Education, surveyed graduates from two institutions in British Columbia for the purpose of evaluating the relationship between post-secondary education and employment. They

also wanted to identify factors that encourage successful graduation and the barriers and problems faced by students during their university years.

Their study begins with the premise that "research is a cultural, human activity, and like all cultural activities it should proceed from the culture" (p.11). Consequently, principles consistent with First Nations' worldview and the values of honesty, respect, and sharing guided their research design. Archibald and associates developed both a qualitative and quantitative approach that they named the 'Process Model'. This model involved a questionnaire survey, focus group discussions, and a minimal number of telephone interviews. It involved two post-secondary institutions, specifically the University of British Columbia (UBC) and the Native Education Centre in Vancouver, the latter of which provides basic academic and pre-employment skills to Aboriginal adults wishing to better cope with the transition to an urban lifestyle. For the purposes of this study, UBC is considered as most similar to the University of Alberta, and for this reason, the discussion of the study's findings and recommendations is limited to the success factors and barriers related to UBC graduates.

Factors identified that increased success were predominantly from First Nations' programs and student services. These sources of support included Aboriginal program staff, students, the presence of Elders and practical resources such as tutoring. The other significant factor affecting success was support from First Nations such as that received from families and communities. This support helped to build or retain their identity, values, determination and commitment: "Being strong with a First Nations culture, then, constituted a major success factor for the questionnaire respondents" (p. 91).

Barriers included initial perceptions of the university, especially during the first few months, which were dramatically characterized as negative at worst and neutral at best. The shock of relocating from a rural First Nations setting to an urban white one was also identified. This shock was not limited to the individual or even the relocation of a nuclear family. It extended to the larger family and even to the community left behind: "The presence of one family member in university can cause difficulties at home that may be intractable" (p.91).

Another barrier identified by the majority of participants was inadequate funding and availability of sponsorship. This, for the most part, referred to funding received from

First Nations. Racism and discrimination were also cited as barriers to success. This factor included the impact of current occurrences and the impact of remembering past occurrences during primary and secondary school years.

Overall, personal issues such as financial problems, emotional instability, issues related to identity, lack of skills, and family responsibilities accounted for half of the obstacles identified. The other half referred to institutional issues such as deficiencies in support services, poor teaching staff, and lack of respect and tolerance for First Nations' culture. Archibald et al. make an important point to those who do not necessarily accept the idea that these barriers apply especially, or in a unique way, to Aboriginal students: "Although students of all cultures may share these feelings, many take on a special meaning in the First Nations' context because of the history and present status of First Nations in Canada and may weigh more heavily than for the general population" (p. 92).

Among the many issues revealed in this study, and of most interest to my research, were those relating to the experiences that affected graduates in terms of identity, or who they were as Aboriginal people. The impact of UBC on graduates' identities indicated a positive impact overall: "The positive aspects confirm identity and legitimacy; the negative aspects of the post-secondary experience challenge it and force resolution and firming of identity and power" (p. 93). In other words, even the negative aspects can serve a positive function. In many ways, this statement describes my own experience at University. I experienced conflict and confusion while I was an undergraduate student. But I endured and resolved these difficulties. I gained a university degree and a stronger sense of my own self worth and personal identity as an Aboriginal person. The findings related to the impact of UBC on identity, coupled with my own experience, have advanced my thinking about the issues.

A second study that proved highly relevant was one undertaken in Ontario by Wendy Young in 1996. In a Participatory Action Research project, she documented the experiences of Aboriginal students in two post-secondary institutions. The purpose of this study was to assist with the identification of needs and the subsequent development of programs and services to meet those needs. The findings of this study confirm and parallel those of Archibald et al., and therefore do not require discussion or elaboration.

Young's choice and discussion of qualitative methods, however, are deserving of further comment.

Although Young (1996) is not an Aboriginal person, she claims to have many years of experience working with Aboriginal students and teaching in the field of social work. In the study, she demonstrated an appreciation and respect for cultural differences and conducted her research in culturally appropriate ways, as did the Aboriginal researchers in the UBC study.

Young (1996) used both research circles and individual interviews to gather data from 35 Aboriginal students. Students had the option of participating in one research circle, or in as many as they wished. They also had the choice of participating in an individual interview. Participation ranged from one circle to involvement in all activities. I was interested in Young's comments regarding the use of both talking circles and individual interview methods. She found that the two methods did not reveal any difference in terms of the content revealed in either method, although she claimed that the volume of data from individual interviews was greater. In other words, she did not find the individual interviews to be a superior method.

Both methods being equal, the feedback she received from participants concerning the research circles influenced my choice of talking circles over individual interviews as a research method. According to Young, the participants experienced the research circles as providing an important source of support and meaning because they "created a sense of community within the college and university" (p.505). This added aspect of providing support and creating community further encouraged my decision to use the traditional Native practice of talking circles since Young's finding implies that from a research perspective, they would yield adequate breadth and depth of data. The development and application of talking circles as a research method are outlined in chapters three and four.

Aboriginal Student Perspectives

First Person, First Peoples: Native American College Graduates Tell Their Life Stories is a collection of essays, written by Aboriginal graduates of Dartmouth College, a predominantly white, Ivy League American College in New Hampshire (Garrod & Larimore, 1997). The collection may not be a typical academic research endeavour, but I

consider the work to be a scholarly effort and an important addition to the collection of thought that helps to bring forward issues of importance to all Aboriginal students pursuing higher education. The essays describe the authors' experiences prior to and during their attendance at Dartmouth. Graduates originated from across the United States. Each story reflects a unique cultural background and all highlight ways that the experience affected and ultimately strengthened their identities as Aboriginal people.

Garrod and Larimore (1997), who edited the volume, divided the stories thematically into three sections. *When Worlds Collide* discusses the initial challenges and difficulties experienced by the Aboriginal students. In particular, this theme focuses on the "cultural discontinuity" that many of them felt when leaving their home communities with their shared worldview and moving into a foreign 'Western' worldview and way of life. *Planted in the Ground* explores some of the ways that their Aboriginal identity was "challenged, shaped, or reinforced" as a result of the college experience. And finally, *Coming Full Circle* is a comprehensive discussion of the ways in which their college degrees contributed to their analytic skills, their "intellectual confidence," and their overall strength in their ability to "give back" -- to serve the Native Community.

Similar to the students in the previous two empirical studies, graduates of Dartmouth describe the need to search for and strengthen identity. Robert Bennett (1997), for example, "has to relearn who he is and confront his own stereotypes about Indian people" (Erdrich, p. xii). Each author also identifies the importance of fellow Aboriginal students and support staff in their survival and success.

'When Worlds Collide', 'Planted In The Ground', and 'Coming Full Circle' – the three central themes briefly discussed above – gripped my attention. They motivated me to explore the experience of Aboriginal graduates at the University of Alberta. I wondered whether similar and related themes might emerge from the stories of my peers.

Aboriginal Women and Identity

A more recent publication that advanced my thinking is Kim Anderson's *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (2000). Anderson's book describes the outcome of her own journey as an Aboriginal woman gathering information about her identity. She presents stories and teachings shared by 40 Aboriginal women from across Canada and seeks to develop a theory of identity formation that can help

other Aboriginal women struggling to find ways to know who they are and feel positive about themselves.

One of the things that caught my attention in reading Anderson's account is her description of the critical incident that provoked her self-discovery and an interest in the journey of other Aboriginal women. This critical incident took place while she was attending University and involved a classmate making the argument that Aboriginal people have two options if they wish to survive in society today -- to assimilate or go "back to the bush" (p. 24). In her words, this position "touched all sorts of buttons about my own position as an assimilated Native person, and brought on a hurricane of emotion. ... Underneath the explosion I discovered a profound sadness" (p.24). Anderson attributed this sadness to the knowledge she was acquiring about the history and persecution of Aboriginal people and to her growing up without a grounded sense of identity as a Native person: "It is clear that whatever had been repressed in my consciousness came to the surface that day. I was crying for the losses experienced by my ancestors, but I was also crying for my own loss of identity" (p.25). In Anderson's words, "the gaps in my emotional, mental and spiritual experience eventually caught up with me, taking me by surprise when they did" (p.24).

Anderson goes on to describe her struggle to 'belong' in a Native community while both Native and non-Native people questioned her 'Indian-ness'. She found this experience to be common to other Aboriginal women. In her words, "For many of us, part of being Native is feeling like we aren't!" (p.27). She describes the negative images of Aboriginal women that exist in society today and how the problem with addictions in our communities is a misdirected attempt to address the shame of negative stereotypes and the confusion around our identity.

Anderson's secondary purpose is to present stories of Aboriginal women who possessed a strong sense of pride in themselves and their heritage in hopes of illustrating those features within their experiences that could perhaps help other Native women find their own strength and pride. She identified parental and family pride in identity as one of their foundational strengths: "Shame or denial about Native heritage is easier to avert when we come from families that insist on taking pride in tribal identity" (p.116). She also identified the need for ties to community: "Many urban Aboriginal people do not

have the opportunity to return 'home." In order to nurture their sense of identity, they must look for alternatives. They often begin to rediscover their sense of identity by hooking up with other Aboriginal people" (p.123). Especially, "for women who have come from dysfunctional families or communities, urban Aboriginal communities offer a place to heal and to build alternatives" (p.124). This importance of community is echoed by many who write about the issues facing Aboriginal students in post-secondary institutions. (Haig-Brown, 1995; Hampton, 1995a; Weber-Pillwax, 1999)

In the end, Anderson accomplished her goal by proposing a theory of identity formation that involves a four-step process of self-definition. The first step, *Resisting negative definitions of being* addresses the need to acknowledge the role that negative stereotyping plays in the way we view ourselves as Aboriginal women. Anderson states that racism persists in the school system from elementary through to post-secondary level. Marlene Brant-Castellano's story, in this book, illustrates the issue of addressing the relationship between racism and identity. Her words describe the shift from a negative identity to a growing awareness of being Native during her time at university:

> In school when I learned about the savage Iroquois and how they slaughtered the brave pioneers and priests, I made no connection between the textbooks and the Mohawks of which I was one. But at University, people began to ask questions about my Indianness and I realized that I had been socialized into an identity that totally ignored my heritage and history. This was the beginning of my conscious efforts to sort out what it means to me to be an Indian in modern society (p.138).

Reclaiming Aboriginal tradition follows the act of resisting negative definitions and negative stereotypes. It refers to the need to reclaim and reaffirm that part of themselves that "they have themselves denied or [where] they have been denied their heritage" (p.145). It further refers to Aboriginal women's need to reclaim their inherent authority. Historically, Aboriginal women played a major role in the governance of their communities. They were regarded as equal partners and most knowledgeable to make decisions regarding the needs of children and family life. Their capacity to give and nurture life was honoured and commanded respect. Anderson (2000) explains the shock that Europeans must have felt at the position of authority held by Aboriginal women and "it was not long before they realized that, in order to dominate the land, and the people that were occupying it, they needed to disempower the women" (p.58).

Step three, *Constructing a positive identity by translating tradition into the contemporary context,* is the current challenge for Aboriginal women who realize that we cannot return to the 'old ways' as they were. Traditions must be adapted. For example, there is a resurgence of interest and involvement in rituals and ceremonies such as the sweat lodge ceremony. What is important is to bring forward the principles, values, and 'natural laws' that were intrinsic to the 'old ways' and to Aboriginal worldview so that balance and harmony is attainable.

The fourth step in Anderson's theory of identity formation involves women *'Acting'* on their new positive identity in a way that nourishes the overall well-being of their communities (p.15). Finding and using one's voice is one example of being able to 'act'. One woman in her study used her voice as a "way to protest racism against Native people and the racism that fed her denial about her heritage" (p.146).

Summary

In order to provide a theoretical framework for this study of Aboriginal post-secondary student experience, I began this chapter with a description of Aboriginal worldview as it is presented in the literature. The discussion included the concept of holistic interconnectedness and the principles of harmony and balance as essential aspects of the Aboriginal worldview. The notion that Aboriginal worldview acknowledges the existence of 'spirit' in all creation, including our unique relation to the land as a living entity, was also discussed. Finally, the multi-faceted concept of community was presented as being central to an Aboriginal worldview. The idea of individual identity as inseparable from collective association was highlighted.

The second section also relied on the categories of holistic interconnectedness, spirituality, and community to discuss Indigenous peoples and higher education. The literature clearly demonstrates that post-secondary institutions embody a Western worldview and are consequently in conflict with the Aboriginal worldview. For example, Universities emphasize competition and individual success, while the Aboriginal worldview emphasizes interconnectedness and harmony within the community. These and other differences affect Aboriginal students' success.

Spirituality was also discussed as an important, and most often absent, aspect of the university experience. The point was made that education and spirituality are closely

linked within the Aboriginal worldview. The discussion of community was also provided for its significance in the experience of Aboriginal students at university. A sense of community and the need to belong are critical to student well-being and success. The notion of community also adds another level of responsibility for students who are often obtaining a degree in order to return to their communities and contribute to the well-being of their people.

'Living-in-two-worlds' is a common theme presented in the literature, and for this reason, it was included in the discussion of Indigenous people and post-secondary education. This concept refers to the struggles that exist within the 'self' for those who are of mixed blood as well as for those Aboriginal people who enter a mainstream community such as a university. Another common feature found in the literature is the notion that some Aboriginal people believe that they must either reject the Western worldview or sacrifice their Aboriginal identity for higher education. I agreed with those authors who see the solution to succeeding in two worlds as a rejection of neither, but rather reconciling the conflict in a way that allows for a blending of both worlds.

Selected literature, the third and final section, was a more extensive discussion of several studies relevant to my study. It began with two Canadian studies addressing the issues of Aboriginal students in post-secondary institutions. The first study, *Honouring What They Say: Post Secondary Experiences of First Nations Graduates*, (Archibald et al., 1995) identified factors such as First Nations' programs and student services, cultural and community supports, and a strong Aboriginal identity that contributed to the success of Aboriginal students. The authors also identified barriers to success, including racism and family responsibilities, to name several from an extensive list. Their finding that the university experience overall had a positive impact on identity was of particular interest and relevance to my study.

Aboriginal Students and Post-Secondary Education: A Participatory Exploration of Experiences and Needs at a University and Community College in Northeastern Ontario (Young 1996) offered findings similar to those of the above study. Young's research methods involved talking circles and individual interviews. Young's comparative assessment of circles and individual interviews as research method were informative and influential in the development of the research method for my study.

Selected literature also included Aboriginal student perspectives. This was a discussion of the essays written by the Aboriginal graduates of a post-secondary institution that shed light on student experience. *First Person, First Peoples: Native American College Graduates Tell Their Life Stories* (Garrod & Larimore, 1997) provides a personal look at identity and the overall positive impact that resulted from attending one post-secondary institution. Aboriginal women and identity explored a theory of Aboriginal identity development as proposed by Kim Anderson. Her theory is the outcome of extensive interviews with Aboriginal women across Canada; it proposes a four-step process of identity formation involving the need to resist, reclaim, construct and act.

All of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two contributed to a conceptual framework for this study. In addition, much of the work discussed provided guidance in the development of an appropriate methodology, the subject of Chapter Three.

In my review of background literature, I saw evidence that Aboriginal students who come to University must confront themselves in their work and in their personal lives while there. Much of the literature lists the dismal retention rates of Aboriginal students (Lang and Ford, 1988). However, the literature does not always reveal the extent to which issues of identity may be the source of the problems. Hampton (1995b) believes it plays a large role as Aboriginal students "...must continually struggle to find self worth, dignity and freedom in being who they are" (p.35).

Reyner (1993) blames the Western worldview that dominates epistemology, methodology and pedagogical structures in university. He claims that the Western European concept of higher learning was not designed for Aboriginal people. It was designed for specific classes of European cultures with values often in opposition to ours, and therefore cultural conflict in higher education can affect success (Reyner, 1993). Smith (1999) agrees and summarizes her beliefs with these strong words:

> [For] indigenous peoples, universities are regarded as rather elite institutions which reproduce themselves through various systems of privilege. ...many indigenous students find little space for indigenous perspectives in most academic disciplines and most research approaches. ...Indigenous staff and students, too, have found the institution to be toxic. (p.129)

CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

Aboriginal people have been the subject of research for many years, but in many instances, the research has been disrespectful. Aboriginal worldview and behavioural protocols have largely been ignored. As well, Aboriginal communities have experienced little benefit from endless studies of their traditions, culture, and current issues. For both these reasons, Aboriginal people have become cynical about Western research paradigms and studies. (Archibald, 1997; Graveline, 1998; Smith, 1999). Smith provides a glimpse of this reality when she states "[t]he word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. ...[it] stirs up silence...bad memories... distrust" (p.1).

Young (1996) asks an important question of Western post-secondary institutions that assume authority over the definition and development of knowledge: "Can a government or institution which is oppressing a group of people at the same time conduct research which will facilitate the resolution of the problems that the oppression generates?" (p.43). In other words, how can researchers working within a Western paradigm and design carry out studies that are appropriate and useful to the Aboriginal community? Odden (1995) answers this question with regard to Anthropological study by echoing Young's sentiment:

> A coldness blows between writer and subject in the very word 'subject'. It rouses an issue of political and social power....In this view, the very act of observation is a position of power, typified by the fact that the observer has a mobility in and out of the situation that is generally not shared by the object of study. The student of culture has typically been an outsider, notebook and camera and tape recorder at the ready. This is the model of learning that anthropology has presented. (p.211)

There is a definite need for a power shift away from traditional Western research paradigms that have reinforced the various elements of the colonization process. There is a need for an alternative research paradigm that supports the aspirations of Aboriginal people and researchers (Smith, 1999; Weber-Pillwax, 1999). It is time for Aboriginal people to direct their own research endeavours and to speak from their own perspective.

As an example, Haig-Brown (1995) objects to the term 'gaining access' because it "conjures up a vision of breaking down a gate or arriving with a search warrant" (p.33). I agree with this point. Aboriginal researchers do not 'gain access' to their communities.

They are part of the community and are involved in a variety of relationships that neither begin nor end with the role of being a researcher. Another practice that Aboriginal communities find offensive involves researchers entering an Aboriginal community without appropriate consultation in developing research designs, data collection procedures, and determining how results will be used. And Archibald (1997) summarizes the sentiments of many Aboriginal people this way:

> Based on my teachings and experience I do not understand how anyone could think that they could master knowledge about our cultures by "living" with us for relatively short periods of time; then work at getting a 'true' depiction of our cultural principles and practices by focusing on a few 'variables' or parts, and finally have the audacity to take away the knowledge people have given, perhaps never to be heard from again, until an insider from the culture finds a book written by the outsider anthropologist/ethnographer (p.49).

Finally, we must return to the fact that conducting research is not a neutral activity. It is highly political. Research, not unlike an educational curriculum, "is always a choice from a wider universe of knowledge and values... with some groups having the power to declare their knowledge, values, and histories [official knowledge], while others are marginalized" (Apple, 1995, p.ix). In this instance, Western Euro-centric research, predominant in universities, devalues Aboriginal worldviews, knowledge, and communities.

We are seeing an increase in the numbers of Aboriginal social science graduates. They will begin to make the change in perspective necessary in both the academic and Aboriginal communities so that Aboriginal people will become less cynical and more involved in research endeavours. Already, some Aboriginal communities have written protocols and lists of expectations to which researchers must conform. And some First Nations require that researchers sign contracts before working within their territories.

This chapter is concerned with one aspect of an overall research project, namely methodology. It begins with a discussion of the ethical considerations necessary to doing research in an Aboriginal context. This is followed by a brief overview of Western qualitative methodology and a discussion of Aboriginal talking circles -- a traditional form of communication inherent to the Aboriginal community. An elaboration of talking circles, their history and principles, demonstrates that this Aboriginal tradition is a useful and appropriate qualitative research method for this study. The final section of this

chapter documents the development of talking circles as a research method. Designing the research method involves a discussion of the guidance circle process, including the selection of members and their feedback.

Ethical Considerations

> *Moral research behaviour is more than ethical knowledge and cognitive choices; it involves the person of the researcher, his or her sensitivity and commitment to moral issues and action ... these two attributes – the sensitivity to identify an ethical issue and the responsibility to feel committed to acting appropriately in regard to such issues....In the end... the integrity of the researcher – his or her honesty and fairness, knowledge, and experience – are the decisive factors. (Kvale, 1996, p.224).*

Ethical decisions are informed by our values and by our respect for cultural diversity and sensitivity. Researchers who are guided by a strong moral conviction to protect research participants and the community involved in the research place as much emphasis on the research process as the research topic itself. Insufficient attention to the research process, or the use of inappropriate methods, can result in both insult and inaccurate data.

Lionel Kinunwa, a respected Lakota elder and scholar in the field of Indigenous Knowledge, related a humourous anecdote in a graduate class regarding his experiences with researchers who came to his reservation. As a young man, he chose to provide one of two routine and distinct responses depending on who the researchers were and how they approached him. The first response, the '6 pack version' was a brief and often humorously distorted description of a topic. The alternate response, the 'case of twenty four' version, was a full description of the topic or subject of investigation (personal communication recorded in class notes, Education Policy Studies 601, University of Alberta, summer, 1998). Clearly, the 'twenty-four case' version is desirable.

Aboriginal people undertaking research projects in their own communities are faced with finding a middle ground between two worldviews. They must satisfy the demands of Western research while maintaining the respect and integrity of their people. This task is especially difficult for Aboriginal researchers since they, irrespective of their origins, are frequently judged on insider criteria: "[on] family background, status, politics, age, gender, religion, as well as on their perceived technical ability" (Smith, 1999, p.10).

As Aboriginal researchers, we can and must draw upon our own knowledge of culturally appropriate protocols and ethical standards as they relate to specific research questions and to communities. In essence, we are insiders and must exercise the right to represent an Aboriginal worldview including its theoretical and methodological parameters. Smith (1999) goes so far as to argue that the study of Aboriginal people and their experiences "cannot be understood or analyzed by outsiders or people who have not experienced [Aboriginal worldview], and who have not been born into this way of life" (p.167).

As an Aboriginal researcher, I have a vested interest in both the process and the outcome of the research because I am personally responsible and accountable to the Aboriginal community. Wilson and Wilson (2000) describe this concept as "relational accountability":

> Each individual is therefore responsible for his or her own actions, but not in isolation. Individual responsibility for actions must be in relation to all living organisms. It is this web of relationship with each individual in the center that stretches out in all directions. This is our understanding of how the universe is held together.... This relational worldview, carried consciously by some, subconsciously by other Indigenous peoples, affects how we conduct ourselves (even as researchers) in everyday life. (p. 157)

Furthermore, relational accountability does not end when the research project is completed. As co-participants and co-researchers, our membership in and our accountability to the Aboriginal community lasts a lifetime.

Spradley's (1979) 'rules of thumb' regarding informants, or participants as I call them, guided my initial search for a suitable research method. I found Spradley's concern for participant safety and self interest helpful as an overall guide. For example, the researcher must communicate objectives clearly, allow participants control over what is recorded, and make reports available to them. In his words, the researcher "must do everything within his/her power to protect their [participants] physical, social and psychological welfare and to honour their dignity and privacy" (p.35).

Spradley's 'rules of thumb' correspond with the values inherent to an Aboriginal worldview. His basic guidelines for qualitative research study imply a regard for all individuals involved in research. The Aboriginal worldview honours the rights of individuals, including confidentiality, equality, listening, and truth. These principles are

discussed in more detail within the context of the method I have chosen for this research and are presented in the subsequent section, "Aboriginal Talking Circles".

Qualitative Research

The argument has been made that a research method must be culturally congruent. In other words, a study concerning Aboriginal experience must be congruent with the values of the Aboriginal community (Archibald, 1997; Graveline, 1998; Smith, 1999). As noted earlier, this is essential for two reasons: first, to maintain the respect and integrity of the participants, and, second, to obtain the accurate and helpful information or data. A qualitative methodology most clearly matches these ethical, worldview, and research requirements.

Qualitative methodology focuses on the naturally emerging meanings assigned to people's experiences in order to understand how humans make sense of their surroundings (Patton, 1990). Although qualitative research resists a more specific definition, Cresswell (1998) describes its basic parameters in this way:

> Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (p.15).

Most authors agree that qualitative research provides personal insights about a group of people and thereby offers an opportunity to see and understand their perceptions of the world (Morse, 1994b). Because qualitative research seeks to understand the world of meaning in an holistic way and explores the personal aspects of relationships within a system or culture, it is appropriate for my research study.

Qualitative research also recognizes that the researcher does not stand apart but rather in relationship to both the study and the participants. The qualities of empathy, flexibility, listening, and clarity are essential for a qualitative researcher and coincide with the Aboriginal worldview (Denzin, 1989).

Qualitative study, furthermore, is concerned with emic knowledge, or understanding arrived at from the perspective of the participants (Cresswell, 1998; Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996; Morse, 1994b). In this study, I sought to understand the university experience of Aboriginal women and the impact this experience has had on their lives. In

fact, this study assumes that only Aboriginal university graduates could tell me what I wanted to know. This study concurs with a qualitative methodology in which "the essential assumption ... is that the participants are knowledgeable and that their way of knowing will be accepted and their voices reported in the research results" (Young, 1996, p.46).

The adoption of this paradigm left me with the task of finding a research method congruent with both a qualitative methodology and Aboriginal worldview and ethics. This search led me to literature on the talking circle.

Aboriginal Talking Circles

> *In ancestral times, the Sacred Circle was central to the teachings of the Elders. The circle is a form that arises in nature and is imprinted upon our culture as well as our individual cells. Part of the energy of the circle has to do with the physical structure: a circle has no head and no tail, no beginning and no end. Everyone is equal in a circle... . (Cahill & Halpern,1992 as cited in Graveline, 1998, p.130)*

The 'circle' itself is a symbol that encompasses the qualities and characteristics needed for respectful communication. Many authors speak about the importance of circles in Aboriginal culture and worldview (Graveline, 1998; Forbes, 1997; Banyacya, 1997). I first read about 'the circle' in *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* and defer to his words:

> You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles and everything tries to be round....the sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves. Our tepees were round like the nests of birds, and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children. (Black Elk, 1961, pp.198-200)

Regnier (1995) agrees with Black Elk that the symbolic circle is sacred: "The symbolism represents unity, interdependence, and harmony among all beings in the universe.... These cyclical patterns and recurrences constitute the reality in which humans can understand purpose and meaning" (p.316). Within Aboriginal worldview, in

other words, "all life is a circle" (Graveline, 1998, p.75). The Aboriginal paradigm embraces life as a "circular, ever evolving dynamic" and consequently challenges a researcher "to shift from the linear, mechanistic cause-effect models of thinking" dominant in Western research models (p.75).

Talking circles are proposed as an effective research method that can be respectfully used by Aboriginal people in their work with Aboriginal communities. For instance, a talking circle allows individual voices to be heard as equal members within the whole, and therefore it avoids competitive struggle. Everyone has an equal opportunity to speak and be heard. Each member, including the researcher, has a reciprocal responsibility to individual participants and to the whole circle. In my experience, circles take on a life of their own, and participants cannot be dominated or directed by one member. In addition, the understanding is that individuals will speak their truth from the heart. Consequently, stories shared in a talking circle provide a special form of communication because the talking circle demands a depth of feeling, and emotional expression is demanded, a depth that is "uncommon in the western education context" (Graveline, 1998, p.148).

History of Talking Circles

Given the Aboriginal oral tradition, there is little written historical documentation on circles as a form of communication. Oral accounts describe tribal decision-making as a process of gathering together and individuals speaking their minds. This process continued as long as was necessary and until consensus was reached. In general, talking circles were used "to bring understanding between tribal peoples in times of decision-making, conflict resolution or healing" (Graveline, 1998, p.131). Sinclair (1993) describes her discussion with an Elder who confirmed that talking circles are an ancient healing tradition:

> He told me that long ago, our ancestors would use a special stone for prayers in a circle where they would hold the stone to their mouths and speak their truth. These stones were passed down from generation to generation until the power of each person's spirit bored holes right through the stone. I am told that the Grandfather rock parted itself out of respect for the prayers of each person's spirit (p.81).

Talking circles have more recently taken on a variety of names including 'healing' circles and 'justice' or 'sentencing' circles. In Hollow Water, a northern Manitoba community, sentencing circles have had much success in addressing the pattern of the 'revolving door' common to Aboriginal offenders in the penal system (Ross, 1996). Circles have been adopted as part of restorative justice efforts.

The term 'healing circle' describes talking circles used for the purpose of restoration of well-being within Native communities. Many believe that there is a 'healing movement' underway with the promotion of sobriety, ceremony, and holistic well-being within Indigenous communities (Elder Geesisokwe, personal communication, 1999). Graveline (1998) believes that healing is an inherent component of all talking circles.

> Stories of pain, survival and success inspire ourselves and others and become lessons from which we can learn. ...our painful experiences can become lodged in our bodies. Through circle work, I have witnessed the expression of very personal and painful experiences. When the memories are released as a story within the safety of a talking circle, all the participants together are able to share in the learning and healing, thus we all share in the personal growth. (p.178)

Stan and Peggy Wilson (2000) discuss the cultural significance of the circle and its use in the classroom to assist with learning. It is significant that circles create equality among and respect for all members learning or points of view. This is accomplished, in part, by the passing of an eagle feather, or a similar sacred object, with the holder of the feather speaking her mind and from her heart regarding the topic at hand. Circle members listen without interruption until the speaker is finished and passes on the sacred object. No one may speak across the circle or out of turn. The circle is regarded as sacred, and the holder of the eagle feather is obligated to speak truthfully. The speaker is also required to limit her words to her own experiences and feelings. Generalizing or speaking for others is not permitted (p. 11).

Principles of Talking Circles

Sinclair (1993) began using the circle concept for community healing purposes at the Mother Earth Healing Society in 1988. She identifies the principles inherent to a Native worldview that ensure the integrity of the circle process. These principles include respect, equality, confidentiality, truth, and listening. Respect refers to the right of circle members to choose the extent and timing of their sharing. Respect in the talking circle is

also shown by the fact that only one person speaks at a time. Everyone who sits inside the circle is both a teacher and a student. All are equal. Within the circle, each person speaks her/his truth without judgement. Confidentiality addresses the notion that whatever is spoken in the circle remains within the circle. Finally, listening speaks to the principle of providing support and paying attention to the needs of individuals and various points of view within the circle (Sinclair, 1993).

The circle gives everyone a sense of worth, of being valued and respected (Graveline, 1998). The process helps members learn to be patient and caring and to be attentive listeners. Participants respectfully listen to each other's experiences and come to trust that their stories will be heard without criticism. Graveline believes that the process itself requires much more listening than talking. Compared to other research methods, talking circles place a larger degree of responsibility on the listener. Participants have more time to reflect on what has been said by each participant and are given ample opportunity to formulate their own thoughts prior to speaking. Additionally, although speakers are responsible for what they say, they are not responsible to lead other participants; each speaker is free to speak about whatever it is they feel is relevant to the topic.

The qualities necessary for the facilitator of a talking circle are similar to those of a qualitative researcher. In addition, the facilitator must have knowledge of the various processes and components involved in circles and have received permission from a teacher, or Elder, to conduct the ceremonial aspects. The use of talking circles, furthermore, means that the facilitator must have an overall awareness of the Aboriginal worldview and demonstrate an understanding of these principles and values in their daily lives.

Designing the Research Method

My initial intent was to limit the use of talking circles to the preliminary stages of research in order to elicit guidance and support from peers and respected people within the Aboriginal community. Upon further reflection, however, it became increasingly clear that the talking circle could also provide a respectful, culturally sensitive, and appropriate way to invite the stories of Aboriginal women graduates. The use of talking circles in this way raised many questions that I did not feel qualified to answer. This

section documents the process of developing the research method. It describes the selection of individuals who participated in the Guidance Circles, the process of conducting the Guidance Circles, and the feedback or guidance given regarding talking circles as a research method.

Selection of Guidance Circle Members

I made deliberate choices about who might serve as participants in the Guidance Circles. Participants were selected on the basis of their willingness to contribute, their interest in the subject area, and their related expertise and current involvement in the field of post-secondary education.

Out of respect for his role and for the community targeted, I began by speaking to the Director of Native Student Services (NSS) at the University of Alberta. I also wanted to ensure that as a staff and advisory member of NSS, I was not abusing my position in any unforeseen way. I explained my research proposal and requested the participation of colleagues working in the NSS office. The Director was convinced that the study was worthy and granted permission to approach others in the office. These staff members were all Aboriginal and worked with Aboriginal students on a daily basis. I believed that they would be excellent resource people to include in the Guidance Circle. Their knowledge of the Aboriginal worldview and their sensitivity to the issues faced by Aboriginal students on campus placed them in a position to offer valuable advice on research methods. Several people at NSS agreed to participate in the Guidance Circle.

I also chose women from among my peers, colleagues in the field of post-secondary education, and valued friends in my life who are active in the Native community. Altogether, nine individuals offered their help by agreeing to participate in the Guidance Circles for the purpose of designing the research method, referred to in this study as the 'Story Gathering Circles'. Members of the Guidance Circle functioned in a way similar to Spradley's (1979) informants. They were people "who have expert knowledge... [and] first hand, current involvement in the cultural scene" (p.49).

All of the Guidance Circle members were Aboriginal and all were familiar with the talking circle process. Included in this number was a person I refer to as the 'Cultural Advisor'. She was invited to attend because of her ability to provide assistance with

culturally sensitive issues and to help me explore questions concerning aspects that might arise due to the sacred nature of the research method. Her assistance was invaluable.

I would have preferred to include the Cultural Advisor in all of the Guidance Circle gatherings; however, I was concerned that the time commitment would be too great for her. She was able to commit to the project in some important ways without attending all of the Guidance Circles. She made herself available to me as required throughout the research to answer questions or concerns as they arose. She also agreed to participate directly in the initial Guidance Circle and in the final Story Gathering Circle and ceremony. She brought valued teachings concerning ceremony and offered her own prayers asking the ancestors to guide the work.

After all the Guidance Circle members were made aware of the purpose and nature of the research activity, informed consent was sought. In order to protect anonymity, each participant was given a pseudonym for transcript testimonies. I followed University protocol by explaining procedures to each person individually and again collectively each time we met. That is, I explained that they were volunteers in this stage of the research and therefore free to remove themselves or any information at any time. They confirmed their willing and informed collaboration in two important ways.

In addition to members being asked to sign consent forms, I used appropriate cultural protocol. Tobacco, one of the four sacred plants used in ceremony, was offered to each of the members. I have been taught by my Elders that tobacco must come first in any spiritual ceremony to ask for the blessings and protection of the Creator. This cultural expression of offering tobacco was understood by the Guidance Circle members and accepted as a sign of respect for cultural ways. In fact, one member commented that the meaning behind the offering represented a sacred bond or trust: "I felt comfortable and any fears or whatever that I had were gone because you offered tobacco....It's important to be able to do that with your participants" (GC#2). Another member spoke of the importance of my tobacco offering in this way:

> Our way is oral and you asked us orally for our consent and with the eagle feather, and the smudge, and the tobacco. That's the way I agreed and that's the way I honour. To me that's the highest level of consent and I'll sign that piece of paper because that's what you need for your research but to me it's not important. (GC#1)

Consent, in other words, involved my behaving in ways that were appropriate and consistent with cultural understandings. As Smith (1999) notes, "consent is not so much given for a project or specific set of questions, but for a person, for their credibility..." (p.136). Within the Aboriginal community, consent indicates trust between individuals and the researcher and is the result of shared meanings around traditions such as tobacco, prayer, and circles. As one member noted above, consent did not require signing "that piece of paper" (GC#1). In fact, the majority of Guidance Circle members echoed her sentiments concerning formal consents. Each was equally concerned, however, about jeopardizing my work and signed the consent form in order to fulfill academic requirements.

Guidance Circle Process

It was difficult to arrange a time when all Guidance Circle members could sit together. This resulted in three separate circles being formed over the course of several weeks. Three women attended the first Guidance Circle. The second involved four members including the Cultural Advisor, and for the final circle I met with two people. Each of the Guidance Circles took place in the evening at my home, with the exception of the final circle that was held in a meeting room called the Quiet Room at Native Student Services on the University of Alberta campus.

I began each circle by lighting the smudge that was then passed around for individuals to cleanse themselves. Graveline (1998) provides a brief explanation of smudging and support for the value of including ceremony and prayer in circle work:

> Another common procedure for purifying the mind and body is smudging, in which we burn certain herbs, take the smoke in our hands and rub or brush it over the body. It is a process that helps us to cleanse our mind, spirit, heart and body; to make ourselves empty' of negativity. (p.63)

Once the smudge was returned to me after making its way completely around the circle, I then offered a prayer of thanksgiving for the gifts of life today and to ask for blessings for each of us and for the work we were to do in the circle.

It is ceremony that brings us together physically, mentally, and spiritually, and therefore prayer is an important element in any circle. The ceremonial aspect of the opening was important to each of us in the circles, as one woman explains: "I like that

you brought the stone, the shell, the sage. I like the way you started the circle. For me, the circle must start that way with the smudge and close with that. I really feel blessed with the prayers that were offered" (GC#1).

As noted earlier, talking circle members speak in turn and without interruption. 'Cross talk', or the situation in which more than one person is speaking, is not a general practice. During the first Guidance Circle, however, it became apparent that members wanted to engage in some interactive discussion. We agreed, therefore, to make one complete round in the circle and then allow for cross talk in the circle. This worked well. It was also agreed that at any time during the cross talk period, a member could pick up the feather and others would know that this was their time to speak uninterrupted. I proposed and received approval of this rule for all subsequent circles.

In each circle, I spoke first in order to explain the purpose of the gathering, and gave an introduction to the research topic and my thoughts and feelings about the importance of the Guidance Circles at this stage of the research. I spoke about my insecurities in conducting this work and my appreciation for each member's willingness to help with designing the research method. I explained that one of the main reasons for asking them to sit with me was to clarify some issues or questions that I had in using the talking circle as a method for academic purposes and in a non-traditional way. I explained how important it was for me to do this work with the utmost respect for each of the participants, for the Aboriginal community and for the integrity and preservation of the culture.

I had earlier drafted a set of questions and read these aloud at each meeting of the Guidance Circles. These questions are listed below:

- Is it appropriate to record a talking circle?
- How important is ceremony to the process?
- How can I do that with the least intrusion?
- Is it necessary to have an Elder or Cultural Advisor (CA) present at each one vs. facilitating it myself?
- How will I know if people are telling the truth?
- How do I impose questions in a talking circle when they normally are used for people to talk about whatever they want?

- Should there be cross talk along with the usual rule of non-interruption?
- How much of myself do I share as a member of the circle?
- How do I keep things on track?
- How do I limit people's time so that it's not an imposition to sit for so long?
- Who decides when to turn the microphone on and off?
- How many people are appropriate?
- How do I build trust within the circle in a relatively short time?
- How many circles should I hold?

When I was finished reading the questions, I passed the feather to my left and asked Guidance Circle members in turn to share their thoughts about my questions, my research, especially the method, and any other information that they wished to offer or inquire about. People in the Guidance Circles attempted to answer my questions as best they could, but they also spoke about their own personal experiences at university. I realized that these personal experiences needed to be honoured and included in the study as data.

We closed each circle with a prayer and hugs. People often lingered afterwards to visit and enjoy food, tea and laughter. I concluded the evenings with an expression of my appreciation for their time and assistance.

Feedback from Guidance Circles

The information provided by the Guidance Circles was invaluable. Most importantly, I was encouraged to go forward and to conduct the research with confidence. And although all of my questions were not answered directly, I did receive ample feedback on talking circles as a research method, the researcher's role, building trust, tape recording, the trustworthiness of the data, and several other issues of importance.

Because I intended to use a sacred ceremony as a research tool, I asked the Guidance Circle members for their thoughts on how I might protect the honour of the ceremony and gather the data needed. I was assured that using talking circles for a research purpose was honourable and appropriate because circles bring the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional aspects of experience together into a whole:

> I think the methodology you're using is not only logical for Aboriginal researchers: it is also logical for the Aboriginal community itself. I think that when we bring ceremony to our quest for information, we honour both the people who are in the circle, we honour the focus of the research, we honour our ancestors and we honour each other. (GC#3)

They added that circles are about sitting still, being centred, focussing and paying attention: all are important aspects of balance and harmony and equally important to the collection of research data. In fact, the members of the Guidance Circles applauded the use of talking circles in research because this method exemplifies Aboriginal traditions and values:

> What you're doing is reclaiming our history... we're reclaiming this process, and it's not something that's going to be new. It seems that this institution [university] always views our methods and our ways of looking at things as being novel, and cute. If we are going to actually lead people to information so that they can have the personal experience of learning and growing from it, well then having a talking circle allows that to happen because the learning experience, like the spiritual experience and the intellectual experience, is a part of the whole circle. (GC#3)

One member described her own experience of circles using strong words that denote empowerment -- words such as freedom, safety and courage. While it is important to protect and care for participants, circles go beyond these basic ethical requirements by offering participants involvement in a process of self-discovery and validation:

> I like the circle format. It's liberating and it frees people. People have this chance to speak and they have safety to speak in a circle. I guess, in a way, it gives me courage ... to find my voice. And if it wasn't for the circle, I wouldn't have found that voice because I can sit in the circle and say stuff that I never would've said otherwise. I disclosed my sexual abuse in a circle for the first time... and then I realized that everyone else in the circle was just the same as me and that I wasn't the freak that I thought I was. I just wanted to talk forever because finally I felt I could speak and it was okay for me to talk. No one was going to judge me... and there's no time limit on me... and I think the circle is a good thing. It's not just people telling their stories, it's symbolic of a lot of things. It's wings that we can fly on. I don't think using it for research purposes takes anything away from the sacredness. (GC#2)

Although the circle process tends to facilitate itself, the members of the Guidance Circle advised the researcher to assume responsibility for managing the group dynamics and ensuring that participants have their basic needs met in order that trust, safety and comfort be achieved. For example, the researcher would welcome each of the participants

and have food and beverages available during each circle. It is also the responsibility of the researcher to share his/her own personal journeys and stories in order to be an equal member of the group. The Cultural Advisor reminded me that this was my journey and that I would likely discover a lot about myself as well as learning about the experiences of participants:

> You've got to go inside and figure out the answers....There is responsibility that comes with circles. It's just like anything else. You just don't get the good stuff. There's responsibility that comes with any kind of gift and it's about earning it. Learning and earning are the same thing. (GC#1)

They also assured me that I would not be working alone as a researcher because the women in the Story Gathering Circles would function as co-researchers and help to guide the process. The sentiment that participants engage in the process of directing as well as informing the research is supported in the literature. Spradley (1979) cites Black and Metzger's 1965 dictum that questions must come from within the circle of participants so that they are "...conceptually meaningful to the people under investigation" (p.84).

There was discussion on building trust within the Story Gathering Circles. The Guidance Circle members believed that although trusting can take time, they did not see it as an important issue in this study. They did not see the Guidance Circles as being significantly different from the Story Gathering Circles in that I was responsible for both. As one person said, "even though we [guidance circle members] don't all know each other that well, we still know you and trust you, and you are our connection" (GC#1). In other words, they emphasized the importance of trust in the researcher as the essential component for building trust with the rest of the circle participants. One woman also suggested the idea of meeting informally to assist with the rapport building process, perhaps to share a meal prior to the first Story Gathering Circle.

In response to my question regarding the potential intrusiveness of tape recording, it was decided by consensus that a participant in the Story Gathering Circles who wished to go 'off the record' would simply raise their hand and I would stop tape recording. The most important point made, however, was that all participants of Story Gathering Circles would participate in procedural decisions such as whether to proceed with tape recording, "This is how we do things -- with consensus. Everybody would have to agree that's what

has to be done to respect everyone's individual rights" (GC#1). One of the Guidance Circle members commented that although she initially felt somewhat self-conscious about the tape recorder, that feeling receded as we proceeded.

A question was posed during my candidacy exam concerning participants' telling the truth. I had not considered this possibility, and although I was both surprised and slightly taken aback with this question, it was an important one to ponder and take to the Guidance Circle for feedback. My experience with ceremony and talking circles has been that people who participate in them do not lie, and, in fact, are obligated to tell the truth to the best of their ability. Individuals in the Guidance Circles spoke to this issue. They concurred that a circle member holding an eagle feather, for example, is obligated to speak their truth. I elaborate on this point further by offering Guidance Circle members' complete thoughts in their richness.

> Well, it's right there (points to the eagle feather). When we hold that eagle feather, it's like a truth serum because that feather is so connected directly to the Creator, directly to our hearts and spirit. Holding it with the respect that we have for it means only truth can come. And for me personally it has continually surprised me. Being in a circle is like really being cradled by the Creator and all barriers are gone and things can just come out that even surprise me: things that are real. (GC#1)

> I'm trying to think of it from a non-Native perspective and I'm thinking about when you're in court where they ask you to swear on the Bible. Being in circle is like that and even deeper. Not telling the truth would be like lying to a priest in confession. It would not only be sacrilegious but it has to do with the whole spiritual realm. It is not just about us. It isn't just our words. It's deeper than that. For example, you think you're going to talk about one thing but in the end you don't ever know what words are going to come out or you don't know the tears that might come. So it amazes me when I think, 'I didn't know I was going to talk about that'. That's why we respect it [the circle] so much. (GC#1)

> This [eagle feather] is an important part because for one thing, it's acknowledging the teaching of the eagle feather which is balance and recognizing all of the lessons that we go through to learn about the skills of life -- which is what education is all about -- to bring food, clothes and shelter. And to learn the other part of life which is the spirituality and the philosophy and the values. So that's all in the eagle feather and when you speak with it, it's like it demands honesty. Whether it's the eagle feather or the rock, which is about faith, or the talking stick which is about honesty, you honour all of it by being truthful and by not interrupting or being rude. When it [the feather] makes its way around the circle, it also has the job of joining all of the spirits that sit here. (GC#2)

> We're from an oral tradition... when an Aboriginal person is sharing or holding a feather, we don't say 'well prove that what you went through is true'. We take what they say as more valid than what's written down. (GC#1)

In answer to my question concerning the number of participants, the Guidance Circle members refused to be specific. They did not see the number of participants as significantly impacting the outcome of the research. They saw positive and negative aspects to both large and small groups:

> I agree that a smaller circle is good especially when you're thinking about quality of information, and if you want the genuineness. I mean, if I see eight people here, I'm not going to say a hell of a lot. I'll keep it short and you're not going to get the depth of discussion. If I feel conscious of time and if I feel the need to cry, do I have 30 seconds to cry? (GC#1)

> The other thing is that we all know what it's like when you sit in ceremony, and your back is killing you and your feet are sore, you're tired or hungry or whatever, and you still listen to each other until you're finished. That's just the way it is -- we give each other our time and forget about those other things. (GC#1).

I asked them a question concerning the selection of participants. I preferred that Guidance Circle members refer participants; some did suggest names of specific other individuals. I struggled with the idea that having people who were known to me as participants in the study might compromise outcomes. The literature argues that strangers are most suitable as participants for a number of reasons. First, the formality of the research process has the potential of altering an existing friendship, and second, friendship can impair the researcher/participant relationship and thereby affect the data (Spradley, 1979, p.25). I was told in the Guidance Circle that 'Indian country' is a relatively small population and that individuals live within a complex web of relationships. Therefore, the usual rules for participant selection do not easily apply to Aboriginal researchers:

> I find I have friends who are colleagues, who are advisors, who have adopted me into their family. The extension of who they are in my life takes on so many different roles so, no -- I don't have a problem with using friends as participants. (GC#2)

I asked the Guidance Circle members additional questions. For example, should I proceed with the same group of participants over a series of circles or have several circles with different participants in each? Finally, I was told that I had too many questions and

that I was overly concerned about specific details. I was repeatedly told to trust the talking circle process and my role in the circle:

> I'm not even going to attempt to answer them [all of your questions] because you need to discover the answers as you go along. They're not difficult and you know as you go along the answers are going to come. Don't start setting limits already. (Cultural Advisor, GC#2)
>
> If it doesn't come up in the circle on its own, then maybe it wasn't supposed to. Maybe it wasn't that important, or maybe it doesn't need to, so that's the part that we give up when we smudge and ask the grandfather/grandmothers or helpers to come in. We ask them to help take this where it's supposed to go. (GC#2)
>
> I believe that when you've sat in enough circles, intuitively you know when some things needs to be done, when someone needs to be touched, or you know to turn the microphone off. I would invite and encourage you to really welcome that trust and intuition within yourself. (GC#1)

Ultimately, I believe I was led to the talking circle as the most appropriate way of conducting this study. The sacredness of a talking circle with its built-in respect for the Aboriginal worldview, ancestors, teachings, and fellow participants served to address all of my ethical concerns.

Guidance Circles, at this initial stage, assisted my research in several ways. They gave me the opportunity to sit with a group of Aboriginal people and elicit their feedback regarding ways to best proceed, that is, they helped me decide which questions to ask and the best way to ask those questions. They also provided ideas for participant selection, and generally, gave feedback about issues that might emerge and that I had not anticipated.

Summary

This chapter began with a brief overview of the reasons that Aboriginal people are distrustful and cynical of research in general and of non-Aboriginal researchers in particular. Research with Aboriginal people has not been respectful, nor has it always been beneficial to the people studied. Aboriginal researchers who understand the importance of community protocols, priorities, and political structures are in a good position to address issues relevant and specific to Aboriginal communities. Ethical concerns were highlighted and discussed.

I argued that a qualitative methodology addresses the ethical concerns and is most congruent with an Aboriginal worldview. This section was followed by a discussion of the significance of the 'circle' within Aboriginal tradition, including the history, principles, and process of talking circles.

The process of using talking circles as a component of qualitative research design required extensive consultation with a group of Aboriginal people experienced in the field of education and knowledgeable about cultural protocol. Guidance Circles comprised of nine individuals provided direction in the designing of a talking circle research method. The selection of members and other aspects of the Guidance Circle process were also discussed.

Finally, the following characteristics of the talking circle process motivated a research design in which the experience of participation in a talking circle, with a focused and manifest purpose, was the central research activity:

- Talking circles can be the basis for making the relationship between the researcher and the people who participate in the research explicit: it is a relationship of collaboration, with a clear invitation to speak in a straightforward way; mutual respect is built right into the talking circle process.
- Talking circles constrain the researcher from "second-guessing" in analysis: the analyst does not adopt the position of priority in description of what went on, or presume any other "meaning" than the clear intent of the participants.
- The collaboration in talking circles extends to the way we treat the record: it has all the strengths of both individual response and group discussion.

In short, the Guidance Circles provided me with the information, direction and confidence I needed in order to begin the data collection phase of the research. The following chapter describes the use of talking circles as a research method.

CHAPTER IV. GATHERING THE STORIES

A researcher stands apart from participants, and to a large extent, finds herself an outsider and in the position of working to build rapport, of working to enter the world being studied. But as an Aboriginal student, I was also an insider in this study, a factor I considered to be helpful. Stanfield (1994) supports my understanding: "only those emerging from the life worlds of their 'subjects' can be adequate interpreters of [their] experience" (p.176). In other words, a researcher who is both an Aboriginal woman and who has completed an undergraduate university degree is well suited to understanding the complexity of the experiences under study.

Building rapport is an important aspect of any research process. The participants must be able to trust the researcher before they will share the personal and private information that is the cornerstone of the research (Spradley & McCurdy, 1973, Spradley, 1979). Since I was a member of the cultural community under study, I did not have to spend a great deal of time learning the culturally appropriate ways in which one builds rapport. I already had knowledge of appropriate social behaviour and boundaries and was able to proceed seamlessly from designing the method to gathering the stories (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984, Clifford 1986).

This chapter is concerned with the collection of data from Aboriginal university graduates. A total of eight women participated in the series of talking circles. The first section documents their selection, followed by a discussion of the Story Gathering Circle process. A third section, the "Study Participants", provides an overview of the participants by presenting their historical background and three composite profiles. The final section, "Towards Understanding" presents the method of data analysis and the criteria for evaluating the outcome.

Selection of Participants

Morse (1986, 1991b) says that "a good informant is one who has the knowledge and experience that the researcher requires, has the ability to reflect, is articulate, has the time to be interviewed, and is willing to participate in the study" (p.228). These suggestions were incorporated into the following criteria for the selection of participants:

1. Individuals must have completed a degree and have been full time students at the University of Alberta.
2. Individuals must self identify as Aboriginal women.
3. Individuals must be able to articulate their inner feelings and experiences and be willing to share personal information.

At the time of this study, there were approximately 850 full time Aboriginal students attending the University of Alberta, of which 68% were female (information from unpublished tabulation, Native Student Services, 1999). The Aboriginal community is very small in some respects, and those within the community often know each other. Consequently, I found it difficult to avoid using friends or acquaintances as participants. Although Spradley (1979) cautions against choosing friends as informants because of the difficulties that can arise when the new relationship departs from the expectations of the friendship, he agrees that it is possible to make it work: "a skilled, experienced ethnographer can often work with friends, relatives, or acquaintances, but such traditional roles will always create certain difficulties.... most people find that strangers make better informants" (p.28).

As much as possible, I exercised caution and discretion where friends or acquaintances were concerned. In the end, I felt that the selection method did not detract from my research in any way. In fact, at least in some cases it would be operationally impossible for an Aboriginal person to attempt to locate appropriate research participants within an Aboriginal community who could be maintained as "strangers." In some North American indigenous traditions, interaction with strangers or newcomers is based on an operational assumption of kinship—for example, there can be a kind of understanding between two "strangers" who may agree, either tacitly or explicitly that, for example, "for this interaction we should treat each other as [a relationship that would be mutually acceptable, such as niece/aunt; sisters; sister-in-law" (Carl Urion, personal communication, July 5, 2001). In some groups that practice is realized by reckoning the newcomer's clan affiliation to coincide with the clans of the host community, so that a newcomer in a community is operationally recognized as belonging to a specific local group of families. In Aboriginal social settings, as in mainstream, it is possible, and sometimes necessary, to maintain social distance amongst people, but in Aboriginal

communities maintaining "social distance" has a different meaning. The social distance that Spradley seems to anticipate (where, no matter how friendly the relationships, one person is a "researcher" and others are "participants") would imply a kind of isolation, and that relationship, in an Aboriginal social context, might compromise both data collection and interpretation.

I attempted to select female students from as wide a cross section as possible in terms of age, program of study and faculty, Aboriginal status (Metis, Treaty) and cultural background in order to present a broad range of experiences. In response to my request for suggestions or recommendations, people in the Guidance Circles had forwarded names of possible participants. Individual women who indicated an interest in my study were added to this initial list in order to make the final group of selected participants as representative as possible.

I contacted each possible participant by phone to meet with me in person to discuss the research and their involvement. I explained the research question, and then I addressed any questions or concerns they may have had. Most of the questions they had concerned time commitment. The women contacted did not wish to over-extend themselves with work and family responsibilities.

One person in particular wanted to know who the other participants would be. She expressed some concern with being in a circle with strangers where highly personal information would be shared. I agreed that her question was important and stated that everyone would be required to respect and adhere to the confidentiality principle prior to acceptance as a participant. It was imperative that potential participants have a clear understanding of the importance of confidentiality, trust, and honesty.

Aside from these questions, the women I spoke to expressed genuine interest in the topic and also in the talking circle method itself. I explained, prior to obtaining consent, that participants would need to accept and respect the ritual or spiritual parts of the circle and that these need not conflict with an individual's possibly alternate religious beliefs.

Once I had answered all questions, I asked each to please consider her involvement carefully. I committed myself to call within a week for their response. Each

of the university graduates I invited agreed to participate. A total of eight women participated in the Story Gathering Circles.

Story Gathering Circle Process

The problem of scheduling meeting times was resolved by holding two separate circles (A and B) with four participants each. Story Gathering Circle A met four times and Story Gathering Circle B met five times over a period of three months. These circles followed the same format as the Guidance Circles in terms of the prayer and smudge ceremony, acknowledgement of the eagle feather, and establishment of communication rules. Again, we began and ended each circle gathering with prayers and the medicine smudge. The prayer could have been led by any one of the members although it seemed most appropriate for me as the researcher and host of the circle gathering to assume this responsibility. It was also my responsibility to tape record.

The sacred item used most often was the eagle feather. It, too, was customarily blessed with the smoke from the smudge. Other items used were a rock or a talking stick, each of which can be easily passed from one person to the next and each of which has cultural significance as briefly summarized here:

> **Rock**: the teachings of the rock, who we call the grandfather (because it is the oldest spirit living upon Mother Earth) is the faith and inner strength.
>
> **Talking Stick**: the teachings of the tree is honesty, for us to learn to allow the truth to move through us as the sap moves through and nourishes from the root of the tree to its uppermost branches.
>
> **Eagle Feather**: teaches us about balance in our human development and skills of life and it gives us strength as we walk the spiritual path. (Sinclair, 1993)

Ethical guidelines regarding consent, the option to withdraw, and confidentiality were also explained and applied. Informed permission was sought and received. Throughout the process, I repeated explanations to the participants regarding project goals, tape recording, their role as participants, the parameters of discussion, and their rights as voluntary participants. Permission to quote individual passages was also expressly sought. The participants were informed that the tapes and transcripts of the circles would be destroyed upon the completion of the study.

Rather than presenting participants with specific prewritten questions, I simply read out the following categories and sample questions to serve as a guide for each of the Story Gathering Circles:

1. Personal Background including family, community, and education. For example, where were you born and raised? Where did you go to school?
2. University experience -- In the Beginning. For example, what were your expectations of university and did those expectations change?
3. University experience -- In the Middle. For example, what helped you while you were here and what was the biggest challenge?
4. University experience -- In the End. For example, what did you learn and what would you change if you could?

The above were presented at the beginning of Story Gathering Circles A and B. As it turned out, the women's stories followed no particular chronological pattern. The women clearly did not feel compelled to follow the categories and questions presented, nor did I seek to have them do so. Instead, I assured them that being concerned with telling their own stories as they remembered them was more important than being concerned with my initial guidelines. I encouraged the women to share experiences in their own words, to shape their own stories (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Although patience is one of the qualities that we are encouraged to learn in a circle, it was important to address the issue of time so that the women did not lose interest or their ability to focus and listen to others. I was responsible, in other words, for ensuring that circles began at a specified time and ended at a reasonable hour. On average, circles lasted 2.5 to 3 hours.

Equality is an important component of any talking circle, and ideally, one member should not attempt to manipulate the process. Due to my status as an insider within the Aboriginal community on campus, I was conscious of my dual role as researcher and participant within the circle. If I did not share enough, I risked violating the principle of equality. If I shared too much, there was a danger of influencing the participants, and thereby, skewing the data. To the best of my ability, a balance was maintained.

Story Gathering Circles A and B were held at my home except on two occasions when we met after hours at the university. I invited the women to come early in order to

share food and visit prior to beginning the circle. I enjoyed this visiting time, and it was especially worthwhile in the initial meetings for people to become comfortable with each other and with my home environment. Each Story Gathering Circle consisted of at least two rounds of sharing and concluded with some cross talk discussion. Participants often chose to remain after each of the circles to share stories, laughter, and further discussion. In retrospect, my sense is that familiarity and bonding occurred early in the story gathering process.

Normally, I began the circle by sharing parts of my own story; however, I would not speak long, preferring to allow more time for the women to speak. I was conscious of the fact that either the topics I brought up or the way in which I introduced them, in my own story, might influence the thinking of the people who followed me. With that in mind I constructed my introduction so that the implicit agenda was clearly open.

As noted earlier, the topic of the first circle for both the A and B series covered personal and family backgrounds, the years leading up to university including their perception of their previous educational backgrounds. The second and third circles addressed their years while attending university, including positive and negative experiences that stood out for each of them. The fourth and final circles covered the women's recollections of completing their degrees and leaving university. Circle B required a fifth circle to adequately cover all the stories. In this circle, the women spoke longer on one issue and simply required more time.

At the final Story Gathering Circle, I offered to make the transcripts available to each participant for a member check of the information they provided. Two women accepted this offer. The others preferred to wait and read the thesis. At this time, I also thanked them for their time and, as is customary with Aboriginal gatherings, I presented each of them with small, personalized gifts.

The giveaway is an integral part of many ceremonies and was a way to further express my appreciation: "The Elders teach us that in order to receive what we truly need and want in the world we must give-away what we have" (Graveline, 1998, p.85). Because the gifts were items that either belonged to me or were hand made for this special purpose, they symbolized sharing a part of myself with the participants in the same way that they had given me the gift of sharing their stories.

As part of the gift giving, I also shared a personal teaching about the honour and integrity of women. I spoke to them about Kiditchidawkwe, which means 'women of integrity', and I let them know that I see each of them as examples of women of integrity. Sharing this teaching was very emotional for me. It took me back to a time in my healing journey when I needed to hear the teachings of Elders in order to find my way.

I expressed my desire to invite them to a special woman's ceremony to be held on that month's full moon. I informed each of the women that this ceremony would include both circles A and B. The invitation was met with enthusiasm and gratitude. I invited the Cultural Advisor to attend and to bless our gathering. While at this 'moon ceremony', she shared teachings and offered prayers for all of us. Individually, we gave thanks for the beauty of life and for those things and people in our lives that help us to stand up and be proud of who we are. I gave thanks for the circles that truly were a gift to me.

This final gathering was very rewarding and uplifting and a good way to bring closure to the story gathering process.

The Participants in the Study

The personal history of the participants was both similar and varied. This section begins with a description of the common themes that emerged from their background stories and is followed by three profiles that illustrate background variations. Each profile adopts a pseudonym and is a composite picture of several women. Said another way, although I include details from the stories of the eight women in the three descriptive profiles, they are presented under the pseudonyms of Grace, Charlene, and Karen.

Historical Background

Study participants ranged in age from their mid 20's to their mid 50's and came from a wide range of faculties -- Business, Education, Native Studies, Fine Arts, Graduate Studies, Library Sciences, Arts, and Science. Three of the women had white fathers and Native mothers. Three had two Native or Metis parents. One participant was a foster child with a Caucasian father and Native mother and one had a Caucasian mother and a Metis father. It was not evident in their stories that the issue of their parents' races contributed to any noticeable difference in their perceptions of how happy, healthy or

unhealthy their childhood was. That is, those in this study who described their childhood as happy were from both mixed race parents and same race parents.

There was considerable diversity in their parents' formal educational backgrounds. In one instance, both Aboriginal parents pursued Masters degrees during a participant's childhood. In another case, a non-Aboriginal father was a professional engineer and an Aboriginal mother was a successful professional. Others had parents with as little as a grade eight education.

The women recounted how they felt as Aboriginal children in their respective families. Many claimed that their parents did not feel a sense of pride or confidence in their heritage. Often, shame was passed on to the children. Sometimes, the parents' sense of shame was acted out in anger, and attempts by some participants to acknowledge or embrace their Aboriginal heritage only exacerbated the problem. Several women made reference to their mothers' associating cleanliness with whiteness, and the consequences they faced as children for these beliefs and attitudes:

> My mother was always trying to out-clean everyone on the block. I remember getting beaten because my toy box wasn't neat enough. (#1B)
>
> We had to have whiter gloves, whiter shoes, shinier hair, stand taller etc. She [mother] would make us scrub our skin to try to get rid of those brown spots. (#1A)

The influence of extended family members was most often limited to the grandmother's role in their lives. Six of the women made reference to their grandmothers and, for the most part, relationships were positive. Many of the women also spoke about experiencing varying degrees of acceptance by Aboriginal people outside of the family home. Four of the women cited painful incidents of being criticized and shunned by their own people, which contributed to their confusion about being Aboriginal.

> I was the lightest one in the family and I didn't fit in when we'd go back to the reserve. I got called names there...consequently I spent a lot of time by myself. (#1A)
>
> It was going home [to the reserve] where I felt different....They never did accept us... I remember they always treated me different. (#1B)

One Metis participant spoke of her feelings of embarrassment and shame toward Indian relatives. In her mind, "Metis were at least better than those Indians" (#1A). At the same time, she remembered feeling inferior to white people who were privileged. In this

and other instances, a hierarchy based on race was part of the women's daily reality and resulted in confusion and sometimes in shame. For some participants, these self perceptions of doubt concerning belonging and identity and the definition of 'being an Aboriginal person' continued to be an issue:

> Even now I can go into situations where I think the Native people don't accept me... white people don't accept me either... I still struggle with that. (#1A)
>
> I felt like a disadvantaged Indian... never went to residential school... never lived on a reserve and all the things that are supposed to be my legacy... sometimes I feel distance from, or not part of, the Native community. (#1A)

The data illustrate the women's early perceptions of education and school. Several had positive memories of their school experiences and did well academically. Others recall disliking school and attribute the cause to their Aboriginal background. Many of the women felt 'singled out' for being the only Aboriginal child in the class or school.

In retrospect, all of the women commented on their experience of the primary and secondary school curriculum. It did not teach much about Aboriginal people and when they were mentioned, Aboriginal people were not portrayed in a positive light. They learned in school that Indians were inferior and to this day, express regret and anger at such a biased presentation of history. As one woman said, "history was not told from our perspective. It was told from their European perspective. In that was racism. Shame on them... shame on the teachers for doing that" (#1A).

Overall, the background stories presented a wide range of feelings and perceptions. However, negative childhood and early adult life experiences outweighed positive or 'happy' memories. Regardless of the parental support that did exist in some cases, many of the women grew into adulthood feeling somewhat inferior as a result of their experiences at school and in the community at large. Many noted the absence of a positive Aboriginal identity prior to arriving at university. Others said that being Aboriginal was not an identity that they knew how to embrace.

None of the participants came to university immediately upon completion of high school, and most needed to complete or upgrade their studies in order to meet entrance requirements. In some cases, they were the only family or community member to attend university, or attempt to pursue a degree. In fact, some had not previously known anyone

who had attended university, and one woman believed that university admission was limited to white people.

Although three of the women commented that they always knew they would go to University, their expectations varied. Sylvia was surprised to find other Aboriginal students at University. Others envisioned the university to be a place of wonder filled with knowledge and the tools to help change their lives.

Composite Profiles

Grace is 49 years old and the youngest child in a family of six children born to two Metis parents. She spent most of her childhood growing up in a small isolated community in the NWT where the majority of the population was, and still is, Aboriginal. In many ways, her parents lived a traditional way of life, with her father gone for long periods of time trapping while her mother stayed home to look after the children. Grace enjoyed the benefits of a large extended family and spoke in particular about the influence of and special connection and attention from her grandmother:

> My Kokum was a central figure. She knew even back then how important it was to be proud of who we were. She had a lot of inner strength and she was centred like most Elders just carried herself well wherever she went. I have this vision of her and that's what I would like to grow towards. (#1A)

Grace's family was also raised with strong Roman Catholic influences, and although neither of her parents acquired formal education beyond Grade nine, they understood and instilled in Grace the importance of education.

Perhaps because she grew up in a predominantly Aboriginal community where everyone lived in the same way, Grace recalls her pre-school childhood as being happy with no direct experiences of being or feeling different from others,. However, she does remember abuses directed toward others in the school: "Some kids faced a lot of blatant racism and were called stupid Indians or belittled in front of the classroom" (#1A). These incidences made her determined to show that Indians were as smart as white people by doing well in school.

In addition, Grace remembered being required to fill out forms at school designating race as 'Indian', 'Eskimo' or 'Other'. Grace learned that she was an 'other'. This was the beginning of a growing sense of confusion and insecurity about her identity.

By the time Grace reached grade three, she began to notice other differences: "All the businesses were owned by white people and all the teachers were white people. I saw that white was privileged and that wasn't mine because I was Native" (#1A).

Despite the fact that Grace did well academically in her junior years of school, she does not credit the teachers for her success: "As far as any teachers making a substantial contribution to my schooling, there were none. They never took an interest in me. I didn't feel like school was a good place to be... it was not a supportive environment" (#1B). This feeling continued until she reached high school age and moved to a larger city in order to further her education. In secondary school, she faced racist talk and actions from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal people around her were angry and adversarial towards Whites. They blamed white people for what appeared to be a shared and common background of alcoholism, violence, and residential schools. Non-aboriginal people, on the other hand, treated her and other Aboriginal students as inferior and expressed outright forms of racism, especially in the schools where all the teachers were white nuns.

Grace found it difficult to cope with this social situation in addition to the shock of adjusting to city life and the demands of academic work. She began to withdraw from everyone until her classmates discovered that she excelled in most sports. Eventually, a group of white students allowed her limited access to their social activities.

Grace worked hard at her studies, but negative feelings around school persisted. She recalls learning nothing in high school that allowed her to feel proud of her culture: "We never read about ourselves. We never had role models in schools and on and on and on....History was not told from our perspective. It was told from their perspective. In that was racism" (GC#1).

Grace completed high school but without the senior matriculation credit that was required for entry to University. She believes that this was in part due to the lack of encouragement or guidance: "I could do really well but it didn't matter as far as my teachers were concerned. I never got 'good job' or any pats on the back.... The guidance counsellor told me I could aspire to be a bank teller" (#1B).

After high school, Grace went to work for the North West Territorial government where she met and married a non-Native man and raised two children. She lived and

worked in several northern communities over the next ten years. Finally, fed up with the low rates of pay in comparison to her mostly non-Native coworkers who had degrees, she applied to the B.Ed program at the University of Alberta as a non-matriculated adult.

Charlene is 36 years old. She was born into a mixed marriage -- an Aboriginal mother and a white father who died when Charlene was 11 years old. Charlene had two sisters and spent most of her childhood living in large urban centres, mainly in Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. Both of her parents had professional careers. Her mother was a nurse and her father was an engineer.

Charlene's mother spent several years of her youth in a residential school and later explained to Charlene that she was beaten so much she believed that the Nuns were trying to "beat the Indian out of her". As a result of her mother's upbringing, Charlene's claims her home was often a place of tension where she and her siblings were victims of violent verbal and physical outbursts. Her mother showed other signs of anger and shame such as an obsessive need to overly clean the house in order to measure up to the white neighbours. Charlene reflected that "what she was teaching us was how to be White and how not to let anyone know that we were Native. We weren't allowed to be friends with Natives and we weren't allowed to talk about my Mom's side of the family." (#1A)

In her early years especially, school was somewhat of a refuge from the tension that persisted at home. At the same time, Charlene quickly realized that if she did not do well, she would receive a beating. And so she excelled. School was also one place where Charlene could have some control over her life, and she managed to maintain honour student status throughout most of her school years.

However, not all of her experiences at school were positive. Charlene recalls the painful experiences of being a member of the only Aboriginal family in the area. Other kids would call her names such a 'squaw' or yell at her to 'go back to the reservation'. For Charlene, who had never lived on a reserve, this caused confusion, anger, and shame: "It was definitely not okay to be Native....I felt I wasn't up to par in a lot of things. I had few friends because they just wouldn't let me in the group." (#1B)

Financially, Charlene's family provided for themselves and lived in an upper middle class neighborhood. Charlene benefited from this environment and, at the same time, experienced pressures to excel:

> My mom thought that because she was Aboriginal, she'd have to have the best of everything... middle class neighborhood, best clothes... We were the first ones on the block to have a colour TV, cable. She had a very materialistic ideology. I had to be little miss perfect -- super clean, always have curls and ribbons in my hair, plus I had to take everything available -- ballet, swimming, piano. (#1B)

Despite their professional and financial status, Charlene recalls her family experiencing other problems as a result of being Native in an affluent community. The following racist incident stood out in her mind:

> When we moved into our house in Edmonton, they [the neighbours] thought we must be renting and they sent around a petition to the owner of the house to get rid of us because my mother was going to be on welfare and we were going to be dirty snot-nosed kids running around infecting their neighbourhood. (#1B)

Charlene was rarely exposed to her Aboriginal heritage, and, in fact, the only positive memories of Aboriginal people were the infrequent visits from her maternal grandmother, whom Charlene loved to spend time with: "My grandmother used to say they can say anything they want about you but they can't take away what you know" (#1B). Charlene credits her granny with providing the only positive Aboriginal influence in her life: "She tried to give me cultural guidance" (#1B). Over time, however, Charlene came to a point where she hated being Native. By the time she reached high school, she could find nothing in her Aboriginal heritage to be proud of and began to resent her grandmother:

> I bought into all the stuff the early years of social studies taught me -- Louis Riel was a traitor, Christopher Columbus discovered us... I didn't know about Poundmaker. I didn't know about any of those good heroes. I knew about Hiawatha and Pocahontas though. (GC#2)

Charlene knew from an early age that she was capable of academic success and always believed that she would go on to University. Unfortunately, her abusive home situation deteriorated to the point that she and her sister felt compelled to leave home and survive on their own. Neither completed high school, but Charlene later upgraded to meet the entry requirements of the Transition Year Program and eventually enrolled in the Faculty of Science at the University of Alberta.

Karen is 27 years old. She and her five brothers, two older and two younger, are now Bill C-31 Status Indians. Their father left home when Karen was five years old and her mother raised the children. Karen's mother regained her status in 1987 and decided to

return to school in order to obtain a degree in order to provide a stable home for her five children. This was a bold move for her mother, whom Karen believed to be afraid of non-Aboriginal people. As it turned out, Karen's mother did not complete her first year of university, largely, Karen believes, because of her lack of confidence in a predominantly 'white' institution: "My mother was very timid and shy...and pretty much scared of the teachers and the school and white people in general" (#1A).

Prior to 1987, and a move to Edmonton, Karen's family frequently lived both on and off the reserve in north central Alberta; however, for the most part, their home base was on the reserve with Karen's maternal grandparents, who lived on social assistance. She recalls that 'Moshum' and 'Kokum' would sometimes tell stories or express pride in the old ways of the culture and even teach Karen many Cree words.

Karen claims that she hated having to continuously relocate, especially to new schools. It didn't seem to matter where she went to school; she never did well and always got teased: "I was teased by Indian kids on the reserve because my skin was too 'white' and I was teased by white kids off the reserve for being an Indian." (#1A) This resulted in what Karen refers to as 'pathological' shyness. Karen claims that her shyness and self-consciousness prevented her from doing well in school where she was afraid to ask questions or speak up: "I remember sitting back and wanting to just fade into the wall and not wanting to stand out in any way" (#1B).

Not surprisingly, Karen describes her childhood as difficult. She grew to resent her mother for always being unavailable to support her children when incidents of racism or mistreatment occurred: "I envy [those who had] parents who were there for you...I didn't have that and I don't remember being happy to be at home or at school." (#1A)

Karen doesn't remember learning anything about Aboriginal people in school except when they read Little House on the Prairie in Grade Four, which did generate some curiosity in her. More often, she was made to feel very self-conscious and aware that she was different from her all-white classmates and from her all-white teachers: "They look at a Native kid and they have certain expectations. I struggled but the curriculum wasn't seen as the problem. It was because I was a Native kid...it was a silent type of racism." (#1B)

By the time Karen entered grade ten, she had abandoned the idea of going beyond high school. She hated school but managed to find acceptance with a group of friends who were Native, and, as she says, "unfortunately they were the stereotypical ones... many of them have ended up in jail." (#1B) Even though she felt some support as a result of no longer being the only Aboriginal person in her classes or school, she recalls that the feeling of Native inferiority persisted. She remembered one incident in Grade 11 as particularly noteworthy. Karen was wrongfully accused of stealing a classmate's gold necklace. To this day, she believes the reason that the teacher suspected her was that she was Native. The police were involved and no attempt was made to be discrete as they held her while searching her purse and her locker:

> That was one experience at school that changed me totally. All of these girls were watching... and I was the only native girl in that class. There was even one girl who told me that she saw who did it but was scared and would not come forward to tell. The teacher responsible for this incident never did apologize. (#1B)

Karen withdrew from high school shortly after the above incident and worked in restaurants for the next seven years. While doing so, she befriended a Native man who was going to University and who encouraged her to do the same. He told her Indians were attending university and an office (Native Student Services) especially geared to help her find her way through a program was available. Karen, fearful and anxious, began the journey of upgrading and eventually entered the Native Studies program in 1992: "I was so scared, I didn't even spell my name right on that [application] booklet... university just seemed like something that was way out there. No way, it wasn't for me because I'm a Native girl." (#3B). Looking back, she believes that her reasons for going to University were far deeper than a career choice: "For some reason I thought I wanted to go to university I think to heal myself... instinctively that's what I wanted. I was scared that I didn't have what it took. I didn't really have the smarts." (#2B).

Towards Understanding

A total of nine Story Gathering Circles over a 3-month period resulted in approximately 27 hours of taped narratives. This process, combined with allowing participants to add, delete, or alter their stories, allowed for the emergence of rich data.

Information from the Guidance Circles and my experiences as a university student supplemented the data collected from the Story Gathering Circles.

The discussion of data analysis describes the work of interpreting the data. This section is followed by an exploration of the criteria for evaluating the outcome.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research is something done 'with' versus ' on' or 'to' people, and therefore participants are as much partners as they are subjects (Bogdan and Biklen 1998, Rothe 1993). Consistent with this premise, analysis was initially a collaborative effort of the researcher and the study's participants. In other words, because the research process was built on relationships of mutual respect, trust and influence in which I was an active member in the Story Gathering Circles, so, too, were the women actively involved in the reflective analysis of their lived experience.

In this way, analysis was not undertaken in isolation or separate from the data collection process. It was ongoing from the inception of the research topic in terms of the written field notes and a personal journal that I maintained. In addition, some of the women explained that they wrote down some of their thoughts and feelings prior to sitting in the circle. They did this out of a desire to reflect on their experiences in advance so that they were better prepared to articulate the parts of their experiences that were most significant to them. Even those who did not actually write down their reflections in journals or diaries commented that memories arose as a result of the continuous nature of the talking circle 'process', and therefore, they were reflecting on their experiences throughout the duration of the three-month data collection phase versus reflecting only while sitting in the circle itself. In other words, the 'spirit' of the circles remained with them even after they left the talking circle itself. The stories shared were the outcomes of individual personal reflections and interpretations occurring throughout the entire data collection process and therefore are a result of a first level of analysis.

Following the data collection phase, I explored two qualitative analysis software programs but I found that the use of technology somehow obstructed my need to stay close to the words, feelings, and spirits of the women and their stories. I preferred to maintain a more personal and hands-on approach to locating the patterns or themes that were embedded in the data. To this end, I began by reading the data from beginning to

end in order to understand and capture the 'whole' of what was being said. In total, I have likely read the entire transcripts from start to finish a dozen times, including the three or four separate occasions over the course of a year when I re-read 'clean' copies of the entire transcripts. I also listened to the tape recorded versions of transcripts in whole and in part, several times, especially when I found myself struggling to connect with the 'feelings' and understandings that were so perceptible and necessary to the analysis and interpretation. I eventually came to the point that I could easily recognize, identify, and distinguish each of the women's words and voices at a glance.

Once a sense of the whole was grasped, I began an in-depth process of highlighting the salient points that repeatedly arose in the women's descriptions of their experiences. I combed through the transcripts from start to finish, making notations in the margins, circling words and underlining important phrases, sentences, or sections where the women shared a common understanding. In effect, I 'coded' the data. I then transferred my highlighted comments or codes from each page of the transcripts on to separate pieces of paper in order to reveal the clusters or major themes that emerged. Finally, I extracted an exhaustive list of direct quotes to illustrate the themes identified. I concur with the statement that direct quotes "help convince the reader and help him or her get closer to the people studied" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, p.196).

Each reading of the transcripts further elucidated the themes and sub-themes that emerged and eventually, the way to synthesize my findings in a coherent and comprehensive design presented itself. The primary category of linear time provided a preliminary organization for the thematic analysis. That is, I organized the main themes according to the same chronological format initially suggested during the data gathering process. Their order, simply stated, was the beginning, the middle, and end of the university experience or the completion of an undergraduate degree.

I received feedback from various sources at several intervals throughout the course of this study, including the data analysis phase. For example, I discussed ideas and questions about the analysis with two people in particular who work in the fields of education and research and who acted as mentors to me throughout this study. They helped me sort through the complex layers of meaning within the narratives and to accept that part of the data analysis, or the interpretive process, involves making decisions

concerning the limitations and delimitations of the study. I continuously struggled with these decisions because the participants' complete stories were so rich in 'spirit' that I found it difficult to exclude and limit the data. I kept in mind that "every opinion offered is also a reminder that for every additional viewer there is an additional view" (Wolcott 1994, p.42). In the end, I must acknowledge that another researcher might have made different choices.

I also met with as many of the women as were available to present my initial outline of the main themes. As well, I have attempted to maintain contact with the women in order to discuss the current status of my work and to elicit their feedback whenever possible. Staying in touch with the women in the study also helped to sustain my commitment. Finally, I present the outcome of my interpretive work, respectfully and in good faith so that the themes presented give voice to the nature and to the spirit of the women's stories and university experiences.

Evaluating the Outcome:

Qualitative studies re-'search' for understanding, not for the purpose of explanation of predictive or absolute knowledge (Rothe, 1993). Findings are therefore examined "for their usefulness in improving our present understanding of the human realm" (Polkinghorne, p.3). According to Polkinghorne (1983), if all knowledge is relative to one's perspective with "no absolute point of view outside of one's historical and cultural situation...." (p.103), then there is no single truth or reality that can speak for or completely represent the individual realities of all Aboriginal students. In fact, "there are as many interpretations of reality as there are people in the world" (Rothe, p.121).

The task for the researcher is to describe 'realities-as-they-are' in the minds of those people studied in a way that convinces the reader of the 'plausibility' of the presentation. (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, p.196). In other words, "are the findings faithful representations, descriptions, accounts, or interpretations of what those who ordinarily live those activities would themselves recognize to be true?" (Rothe, 1993, p.123).

The richest data source for the researcher seeking to understand human experience takes place in the face-to-face encounter and is optimized to the extent that trust between the researcher and the participant is established (Polkinghorne, p.267). In other words, the more trust there is between the researcher and the participants, the

greater the information revealed: "A researcher needs to do more than simply ask a question in the proper way; he needs to establish a relational context in which the subjects will feel free and will be encouraged to reveal his experiences" (Polkinghorne, 1983, p.268). Authenticity is the central question of qualitative research because there are no formal conventions or rules for establishing truth. A qualitative study is the researcher's best possible attempt to provide an accurate available description of the reality reported by those being studied (Polkinghorne, p.246).

The thematic analysis and reflections honour each participant's experience but do not in themselves belong to any one individual. Each story contributes to the whole, and in this way, the data analysis may gloss over the uniqueness of each experience. In other words, I am reflecting on the 'whole' of the women's experience versus reflecting on or portraying the uniqueness of each. This is not to diminish individual experience but is necessary in order that a certain aspect of their lives, namely, being at university, can be presented with greater understanding as a whole (Million, 1994).

Polkinghorne (1983) suggests using four criteria to judge the outcome of interpretive work: vividness, accuracy, richness, and elegance. Vividness is the quality that draws readers in, creating a feeling of genuineness. Accuracy is the dimension that allows the reader to relate the findings in some way to their own experience. Richness deepens the meanings presented through detailed depictions that draw out the feelings and stimulate the reader's sensory experience. Elegance is the economical use of words and simple expressions that unify the interpretive work (Polkinghorne, 1983, p.45).

The following chapters constitute the interpretive outcome of the stories gathered from the Aboriginal women who participated. To the extent that the reader is drawn into, relates to, and reflects on their university experience, the work will have gone some distance towards achieving the goals of this study. Furthermore, this study will be authentic and extend understanding if the thematic analysis and the reflections invoke thoughtfulness and sensitivity on the part of outsiders to the experience of Aboriginal students in university.

Summary

This chapter described the process of talking circles used to collect the data for this study. A total of nine Story Gathering Circles were conducted with eight Aboriginal

women who had graduated from the University of Alberta. In order to safeguard anonymity, personal backgrounds of all the women were combined into three composite profiles. Thematic analysis was used to identify the recurring patterns that emerged from their stories. Authenticity within the qualitative paradigm was preserved using peer debriefing and member checks. Criteria for evaluating the outcome were also presented.

CHAPTER V. NOW THAT I'M HERE

Chapter Four described what the women brought to University in terms of their early experiences growing up as Aboriginal women. Chapter Five begins the analysis of the data and thematic presentation. The themes emerged from the women's stories shared in the Story Gathering Circles and are supplemented by the experiences of Guidance Circle members and the researcher.

The following discussion presents the themes of *being in awe, being disillusioned, being confused* and *being alone*. They describe the experiences of the women when they first entered university, including their initial feelings of awe, of excitement about what lay ahead, and of the fear that they would not succeed. Disillusionment was the outcome of encountering an unexpected level of ignorance on the part of professors, fellow students, and support staff. Finally, their early period on campus involved confusion about where they belonged and feelings of isolation, of being alone.

Throughout the discussion, I refer to all eight women by pseudonyms; Grace, Charlene, Karen, Julie, Carol, Janet, Sylvia, and Elaine. In this way, I am able to illustrate the variety of comments made in a more personal way and keep the reader aware of the diversity of people's responses. In order to protect the anonymity of participants, references are identified according to either Story Gathering Circle A or B and to the number within the series. For example, "#3B" refers to the third circle, Story Gathering Circle B, and similarly, 'GC#3' refers to the third Guidance Circle.

Being In Awe

University was uncharted territory for many of the women whose parents and older siblings had not been to university and so could not share stories or help to prepare them for the experience. In fact, most of them were the first person in their families or their communities to attend university. Many things that other students might take for granted were strange and foreign to the women, such as the use of terms essential to understanding the university calendar. For example, many were unaware of the difference between a 'faculty' and a 'department', a 'Dean' and a 'Chair', or a 'major' and a 'minor'.

Some were afraid that their existing knowledge base was inadequate, particularly in the field of science and math, and students from rural or remote communities often

complained of poor or second-rate primary and secondary instruction. Many of the women who had been away from a school setting for a long period of time feared that much of what they had learned was lost in the absence of application. Others described how they 'fast tracked' or crammed several years of upgrading into a very short period of time. Therefore, they worried that they had not learned important material that would be expected for university level work. As one woman wondered: "Would I be able to keep up next to all these young 'white' kids fresh out of high school?" (#1A).

The enormous physical size of the university campus was stressful for the women: "I remember when I first got here and how I didn't think I would ever find my way around. All we had before in our school was a cafeteria, but here there was a mall, and restaurants and bars. I couldn't believe it" (#2B). My own early memories of the university included the fear I felt about using the library. I brought my sister along to help find what I needed. Although she had never set foot on campus, it was easier for me to muddle my way through the process with her assistance than to ask for help from a stranger.

In short, being first in the family to attend university made for a difficult situation. An inadequate knowledge base, fast-tracked upgrading, and no awareness of university terminology or structure were some of the things named by the women as fearful, and sometimes overwhelming. At the same time, each brought with her preconceived ideas about what university represented and what it would provide.

My perception, prior to attending university, was that it was an exclusive place, limited to those capable of the highest intellectual challenges. Many of the women echoed this sentiment:

> Not having known anyone who'd ever been to university, it was like this place was "Wow", where all the geniuses went. You had to be really smart to go there. I remember just being in awe of university professors and all of these really smart people. (#1B)

Having always felt intellectually inferior, I was initially intimidated. As I grew up thinking I would never attend university because I wasn't smart enough, so did other women in this study. Grace commented that she perceived professors to be "way up there" and had believed that university "wasn't for me because I'm a Native girl" (#1B).

Although Karen and Julie perceived university as being within their reach, the other women did not because, in part, they believed that only white people went to university. Janet recalled the first time the idea of going to university was raised. It was a police officer who got her thinking about the possibility: "He was the first person to tell me that and I didn't believe it. It was a far off dream and no Indian kid from [my home community] ever achieved that. It was for other people, not us" (GC#1). This sense of racial inferiority further contributed to the feeling of reverence the women had for university as a place of 'higher learning' and their awe of professors and their knowledge. Words such as 'prestigious', 'humanistic', and 'integrity' describe their sense of *being in awe*.

Holding the university in such high regard, it is understandable that, alongside their fear and intimidation, the women would experience a great deal of excitement. Carol commented that she hardly thought about anything other than university for the entire summer before entering. When orientation day arrived, she wore a new pair of white running shoes and a 'U of A' tee-shirt. Janet was so nervous that she misspelled her name on the application form.

I asked the women to speak about whether *being in awe*, those initial feelings and expectations of university, was sustained. Their stories clearly show a decline in the initial 'reverence' held towards the university. As one woman said: "In the beginning I was so intimidated by all the professors. I was very intimidated by anybody that stood in front of the classroom. That changed really quick" (#3B). This decline is the topic of the following section.

Being Disillusioned

Grace agreed with others that her expectations and perceptions of the university changed shortly after she arrived. University was not this "humanistic place full of integrity and standards. It wasn't a place of beautiful glowing sharing and caring" (#2B). Words such as 'disillusioned', 'corrupt', and 'cynical' contrasted with earlier descriptions of *being in awe*. University was no longer seen as a place deserving of unquestioned respect or deference. The institution fell from its pedestal, so to speak. Charlene's high expectations, for example, 'came down to earth', and Grace's "bubble burst" (#2A). Some

became cynical. Carol's words describe the disappointment and anger that she felt when her expectation of professors was shattered:

> As far as my education here goes, I left the cynic because of the fact that it's not this prestigious universal place. There are corrupt people here. There are people who don't give a damn about you, your culture, nothing. There are people here who are willing to stereotype you and those people are professors, highly educated, supposedly open-minded people. (#3B)

The ignorance, or lack of awareness, concerning Aboriginal people on the part of fellow classmates, professors, and front line support staff at the University was the most often cited reason for disappointment and disillusionment: "A professor makes a comment and you're steaming in your seat because they have no idea what they're talking about" (#4B). Repeatedly, comments about ignorant or racist behaviours were recalled:

> My professor made a comment while a bunch of us were out drinking before class one day. He said 'oh I'll just drink like an Indian'. (#2A)
>
> I remember being in classes where [I had to] defend myself openly or be called on because I was Aboriginal. (#2B)
>
> I didn't make friends with my faculty. I hated going there ...I felt racism there...and threatened in a lot of ways. I didn't feel welcome. (#2B)
>
> I just thought look at all these people – students in the class who are going to take that [inaccurate information] away, and they're not going to question it because they don't know anything about the Aboriginal people. They're going to assume that what this professor is saying is the truth, or 'the word'. (#4B)

The experience of 'ignorance' by participants involved situations in which Aboriginal people were discussed and presented as artifacts rather than as living, breathing people. The absence of lived experience on the part of professors and other students and their reliance on stereotypical and abstract or academic descriptions were experienced as devaluing Aboriginal people. References to Aboriginal people's 'cost' to taxpayers were frequent. In total, participants felt themselves to be outsiders looking in: "I felt like a marginalized, marginalized person...I'm so far in the margins, I'm never going to get on the main page" (#3A).

A further source of disillusionment for the women was more specific and related to their 'standing' as Native students, namely their educational funding. By standing, I mean Canadian Aboriginal people who hold First Nations' status and are therefore

entitled to apply to their First Nation for financial assistance to attend university. Sponsorship is contingent upon the resources available to meet the post-secondary needs of the First Nations' membership. Demands made on these resources vary widely between First Nations' communities. In some instances, Native students reported being denied opportunities for university 'work' because of their First Nation standing. Julie remembered such an incident:

> My department held back a teaching opportunity because they said I had a scholarship. They were referring to my band sponsorship. I told them it wasn't a scholarship – it was a Treaty Right. How many other students were being punished for being on Indian Affairs' funding? (#2A)

Although Julie believed that the faculty's decision was clearly discriminatory, she felt powerless to confront the issue. She felt that she missed out on valuable teaching experience that comes from receiving a Teaching Assistantship (TA) or Research Assistant (RA) position. Such experience has direct implications for meeting award or bursary criteria, enhances one's professional curriculum vitae, and therefore also influences future employment opportunities. Was Julie being penalized for being a status Aboriginal person? She questioned the fairness of the Faculty's policy and argued that there are many non-Aboriginal students who are financially supported by wealthy parents and who also succeed in obtaining desired TA or RA positions.

While the occurrence of ignorant or uninformed comments and behaviours were identified and overcome by those women who participated in this study, they expressed concerns for others. For example, Karen believed that some students withdraw from university as a result: "I've seen so many of our students wounded from that ignorance and quitting" (#4B). If students need confidence to succeed at university, internalizing negative beliefs impedes self worth, prevents students from focussing and being creative, and ultimately erodes their chances of succeeding at university. Janet spoke about this situation as a self-fulfilling prophecy:

> I really got a sense that [the teacher] saw me as a Native person who shouldn't even be in the program and that she did not see me as anyone with any ability. She formed this opinion and I was going to have to live up to, or live down to her opinion of my ability so that whole self fulfilling prophecy thing was really happening there. (#3A)

Being faced with ignorance and stereotypical views of Aboriginal people can also confirm for students their initial perception and fear that university is not a place for them. *Being disillusioned* returns us to the earlier theme of *being in awe*. In other words, the beliefs that Native students bring with them to university, combined with their experience of disillusionment, can result in confirmation of their inferiority and a high rate of failure.

Being Confused

The first way that *being confused* appeared for the women in this study was related to the question of individual identity. Many of the women in the first Story Gathering Circles expressed uncertainty and confusion about who they were, especially prior to attending university. Charlene stated that once her children had grown, she felt lost in terms of knowing herself: "I was 39 years old and I really was a lost soul and I didn't realize it....other than [being a mother to] my kids, I didn't really feel like I had any identity" (#2A). She recalled seeing a therapist at the time to deal with this issue. When the therapist asked her what she liked to do just for herself, Charlene broke down crying because she could not answer the question. This incident revealed the truth to Charlene. Aside from being a mother and wife, she could not identify her needs, interests, or desires: "My husband saved me from my violent home at the age of 16 but I lost my self [in being a wife and mother] and stayed in those roles for many, many years" (#2B). Charlene, along with other participants, wondered who she was and where she belonged.

The women were especially confused about their Aboriginal heritage. This confusion was due, in large part, to early life experiences, including both minimal exposure to Aboriginal people and negative experiences with Aboriginal people. As a result, some of the women did not identify with being Aboriginal. Karen, for example, reported denying her Indian ancestry because it was not acceptable to be Metis. Since the beginning of elementary school, she had been taught to identify herself as 'other' on the school records:

> We were not identified as Metis because we lived the same as everybody else and ate the same food and lived in the same kind of house. We didn't even have that word Metis – it wasn't used. Up north, we were just one of the people except when I started going to school. There was Indian, Eskimo and Other and we had to memorize what we were so when our next teacher asked 'what are you', I had

to say "I am an other'. That was the beginning of some kind of identity issue for me. (GC#2)

Although Sylvia claimed that she did not deny or attempt to conceal her Native ancestry, she also felt it was nothing to take pride in. Her direct experience with Aboriginal people was limited and what little she did see of Aboriginal people in the media or in her 'world' was always negative. Indians she saw in face-to-face situations were either drunk or somehow being a public nuisance: "We never learned to be proud of our culture. We never read about ourselves. We never had role models in school and on and on and on" (#1A). Because she was limited to having seen only negative images, Sylvia's Aboriginal heritage caused inner conflict and confusion.

All of the women commented on learning that Aboriginal people were 'savages' and 'heathens' who danced around with tomahawks and 'scalped' missionaries in classrooms and television. For some, confusion was further complicated and deepened by shame. White people were perceived as superior and being like them desirable. Janet expressed it in this way:

> I was ashamed of [being Aboriginal]...everything. I thought if all there is to know about it is that we're all alcoholics and dysfunctional people, then why would I want to go there...I was acting like a white person. (#2A)

Shame and the feeling of inferiority were passed down to some of the women in both direct and often indirect ways by their parents. Numerous references were made to mothers who scrubbed their floors in order to appear cleaner than their white neighbours or who tried to scrub the colour out of their skin with soap and water. Charlene remembered her mother ordering her children to "never tell anyone that you're Indian" (#2A). Several others described the shame inherited from their parents:

> My Mom had this phobia and we weren't allowed to be friends with 'those Natives', and we weren't allowed to talk about my Mom's side of the family because we lived in this white middle class neighborhood. I think what she was teaching us was how to be White and how not to let anyone know that we were Native. (#2A)

> I wrote a story that said Indians ate moose meat and berries, and I got an A+ on this assignment. When I brought it home, my mom was furious at me because I mentioned the fact that we were Aboriginal. She was so furious that I got beaten for it. (#2B)

As noted earlier, *being confused* was intensified by earlier negative experiences with other Aboriginal people. Julie, for example, remembered visiting her home reserve and being called names by the children. As a result, she played by herself. Karen had the same experience when she moved back to her reserve for two years: "That's where [I] felt different. They said I was using city words and they didn't like it and so they taunted me" (#2B). Julie said she sometimes felt like a "disadvantaged Indian" because she did not attend residential school and never lived on a reserve or experienced any of those things that are supposed to be my legacy" (#2A). She wondered if the absence of these experiences, common to many individuals, meant she could not belong to the Aboriginal community.

I can recall feelings of confusion during my teenage years. I was intrigued by the activity of the American Indian Movement in the United States. I attended several meetings in support of them during the Wounded Knee crisis in 1973 and vividly recall the stares and glares from many Aboriginal people at those meetings who assumed, because of my light skin, that I was White. I was perceived as 'the enemy' who had no right to be present. I found myself consciously spending time beside my mother who was visibly Native in the hope that those present would know I was not White. Many did not accept me, and I carried the apprehension of being rejected by Aboriginal people for many years.

At university, earlier family and community experiences resulted in one woman who was light skinned choosing to conceal her Nativeness in order to protect herself from expected negative judgements. From her point of view, there was a stigma associated with being Aboriginal. As Grace said, "I didn't want them to know or to see me as an Indian first and a student second and then have all this baggage that was associated with being an Aboriginal woman on campus" (#2B).

Others resented being viewed as recipients of favoured status and treatment at university. Many of the women had entered university through a special access program designed for Aboriginal students and had heard it said that this program, the Transition Year Program (TYP), is like getting in the back door. In other words, Aboriginal students who enter university by this route are perceived as both privileged and second class.

Either way, being singled out for these reasons is a double-edged sword and results in further confusion.

At the same time as there were shame, confusion, and denial associated with being Aboriginal, the women were curious and wanted to know about their Aboriginal heritage and identity -- perhaps even felt a need to secure an Aboriginal identity. In essence, this was the core of their confusion and conflict. Uncertain about how to proceed, the women nevertheless saw university as a hopeful opportunity to resolve the confusion. One woman put it this way: "I was going to get to know more about my Native culture because previous to that I didn't want to get to know it. I was afraid of it" (#1B).

During the early part of university attendance, the women also expressed confusion of another kind having to do with the university itself -- learning how to fit into the system. For example, Karen describes her confusion about the term "holistic anthropology":

> I thought that holistic would mean that Physical Anthropology would bring stuff into the circle, Cultural anthropology would bring theirs etc., you know to make one strong circle of knowledge but I didn't see that. Instead, fragmentation and competitiveness was what I saw and it felt so adversarial. (#3B)

In the Faculty of Science, Charlene struggled with the different worldviews: "Science is so culturally infused with one way of seeing things" (#4B). She spoke of the conflict she felt as an Aboriginal person having to suspend her preferred and natural way of seeing things holistically to learn the scientific method of breaking things down into small pieces:

> It's difficult to grasp the concepts [in science] because we're inundated by Euro-Canadian culture, but to be involved in the Aboriginal community and to be in science, it's hard to balance it out...you're expected to think one way in science and another way in your community. ...It's almost like a contradiction and I struggle with that because I think I'm supposed to think one way. I'm supposed to have my mind in the box but it's hard when your mind is above the box or not even close to the box...so I think about that and it's really difficult. (#2B)

Being Confused also showed up in connection with more specific items such as classroom protocol. One woman was embarrassed by a professor making sarcastic comments that the whole class could hear whenever students arrived late for class. Another professor made students uncomfortable for asking questions that he thought

were 'unrelated' or just 'stupid'. These, and other behaviours, were difficult and confusing for the women who learned best by watching, asking questions, and then doing. They were forced, in some cases, to alter what they had always done in order to fit into 'the Western institution'. The writing of academic papers caused confusion as well. Janet said, "I had absolutely no idea how to write a paper when I started here" (#2B). Learning how to write in the 'third person' did not make any sense to Janet because it forced her to depersonalize what she was writing about. At the time of the Story Gathering Circles, Janet continued to struggle to write this way, and in fact, claims she is rarely satisfied with her written work even today because she feels writing in the third person removes her heart from her work.

Being confused was a common experience of the women in this study, particularly in the early years of their tenure on campus. Some admitted that they had no identity or sense of themselves individually, especially in terms of their Aboriginal identity. Many were not exposed to positive images of Aboriginal people either in the media, in their communities, or in school, and they found it difficult to find anything to be proud of.

Being confused further complicated the women's sense of identity although many expressed curiosity and an interest in knowing more about their Aboriginal heritage and even a desire to belong. However, past experiences of rejection and name calling by other Aboriginal people caused them to believe that they were not Indian enough and therefore would not be accepted by them again. The outcome of these experiences was confusion concerning who they were -- their identity -- and in the end, the confusion experienced by the women emerges as a deep sense of isolation, of being alone.

Being Alone

Many of the women who were visibly Aboriginal reported negative judgements during their primary and secondary school years. They described feeling alone and insecure after being 'badly treated' by both teachers and other students. They sometimes feared being the only Aboriginal student in classes where they 'stood out' as being different. To this day, I still recall the fear of one bully in the school who called me a 'squaw' and tormented me relentlessly. I remember always wishing there were other Natives to divert the attention away from me. When I came to university, those old memories re-surfaced, and I found myself always looking for a brown face in the room to

sit with. Rarely did I find one. I did not want to stand out. And when the topic of Natives came up, I wished there was someone else who had the confidence that I lacked to speak up so that I wouldn't have to feel guilty about my silence. Carol described the same feeling only, unlike me, she was visibly Native and therefore could not hide when topics came up and all eyes were on her. Unfortunately, there was rarely other Aboriginal students in any of our classes.

And, as mentioned earlier, although some of the women did not necessarily want to be associated with being Aboriginal, sometimes to the extent of denying their Aboriginal identity, each of them in one way or another commented on the absence of those they silently recognized as being like them:

> I never was in a class with another Native person and I seldom saw Native people on campus. (#2A)
>
> I could go for weeks without seeing another Native person. (#3A)

The above and similar comments point to their desire for support and comfort in the university environment, which represented a strange and alien world. It also speaks to their unspoken need to find a place to belong so they would not feel alone.

Being confused about one's identity contributes to a sense of insecurity and the fear of being rejected. The reverse is also true. Fear of being rejected magnifies the sense of confusion and isolation. For some, *being alone* resulted in the students' trying very hard to fit in. One woman, for example, remembered 'adorning' herself with 'Native jewelry' in order to 'look like' she 'belonged'. Issues of acceptance and rejection by other Aboriginal people were described in different ways by the women:

> I thought to myself that I shouldn't be here [Aboriginal student lounge]... maybe I don't belong because I grew up in the city. (#4B)
>
> I didn't feel I would be welcome there [student lounge] thinking that was the way I am – like a white person. (#4B)
>
> I was embarrassed and I was shy. I felt like my skin was too white and I was thinking [Aboriginal students] were going to quiz me or expect me to speak my language and I just got shivers. (#2A)
>
> I didn't think my skin was dark enough... I didn't think I'd be accepted. (GC#2)
>
> Images of 'real' Natives made me feel that I'm not Native really. (#4B)

As it turned out, early encounters with other Aboriginal students were sometimes uncomfortable. One woman, for example, remembered being disturbed by hearing fellow

Aboriginal students "running each other down" (#2A). Sylvia, in particular, recounted a negative experience with an Aboriginal classmate that caused her to disassociate from the Aboriginal student's lounge where she preferred to study and visit. "I don't know if I just met all the wrong people but....she [this other Aboriginal student] was talking about me right there in front of everyone....I started to hang around with my 'other' classmates and asked myself 'Do I really care?" (#3B). Sylvia was hurt and angry over this incident. She recalled other incidents that caused her embarrassment, and she eventually distanced herself completely from the Aboriginal community for the remaining two years of her degree. Upon reflection, she said it was unfortunate that hurtful situations had resulted in this outcome because the Aboriginal community could have been a source of strength and support.

Being alone also appeared as an issue for the women in their relationships with family and close friends, as well as their communities back home. For example, Julie thought that she was going to university to help her family and community, and she therefore expected them to be proud of her. She assumed that they would encourage her efforts and want her to succeed. Instead, she found their behaviour towards her confusing, especially when they would ignore her when she went home. She was not sure whether family and community members were jealous or whether they wrongfully expected that she would consider herself to be too good for them and therefore be 'stuck up' after living in the big city. For Julie, "it felt like I no longer belonged and it was very painful" (#3B).

Elaine told her story of receiving a teaching award after the first year back in her home community and how hurt she was by her Aboriginal community, who seemed to outwardly and purposely ignore her accomplishment. Some of the participants recalled questioning whether their sacrifice in order to be successful at university was worth it. The following are comments in this regard:

> After I came to university, it's like they're [my family] saying I'm different now – white. (#4B)
>
> Nobody from that Native community came up to me and said ,'wow, you did a good job and wasn't that wonderful'. (#3A)
>
> In some respects I think people looked at me differently and said 'you went to university and so you're different somehow and you've adopted their ways'. I

> think it may have distanced me from my own people. Some of the wounds that I carry are not wounds that I carry as a result of university. They're the kinds of things that happened in my own community and not being validated for my achievements. (#3A)

The loneliness the women experienced with respect to the behaviour of family and community was especially difficult in that none of them expected it. For the women, the commitment to their families and community, especially their desire to contribute, was an important motivation for their attending university in the first place. It was also their source of identity, albeit a confusing one. To feel separated from their families and community therefore set them apart and deepened the question of where they belonged.

Summary

This chapter presented four themes that emerged from the first set of talking circles that describes the beginning phase of the university experience. *Being in awe* describes the women's perceptions of the university upon entry and how they viewed professors as holders of knowledge and placed themselves in a position of relative inferiority. *Being Disillusioned* describes the changes that occurred in terms of their early expectations as the women realized that professors, staff, and fellow students displayed ignorance about Aboriginal people. As a result, confusion during this initial part of their university experience was a common theme that arose in the women's stories as they began to question their Aboriginal identity. Previously, their identity rested on negative experiences while growing up, as in some cases, when shame was passed down to them by their parents.

The feeling of *being alone* was also identified by several women in the study and refers to being alone in the literal sense in many of their classes where they were often singled out to speak about Aboriginal issues. It also refers to the feeling of insecurity about where they belonged and too often feeling as though they belonged nowhere.

CHAPTER VI. THIS IS ABOUT ME

At some point during their student years, the women realized that university was a personal journey rather than simply being an academic or career related endeavour. Finding historically accurate information or *learning the truth* was especially important and begins the thematic analysis of this chapter. *Feeling the pain* and *being angry* are outcomes of learning Aboriginal history. The experiences of pain and anger are closely associated; however, I believe that each is deserving of attention and they are treated as separate themes. The final theme in this chapter, *finding support,* further explores how participants were able to overcome *being confused* and *being alone.*

Learning the Truth

Although the women were 'disillusioned' by the extent of the ignorance concerning Aboriginal people, they also encountered situations that provided them with historical knowledge, especially in Native Studies and various other Social Science courses that included some Native content in their syllabus. They also spoke about learning a great deal outside of classrooms, for example, from their peers, from researching for term papers, and from interacting with other Aboriginal people on campus.

The women reported being overwhelmed by the knowledge available concerning North American Aboriginal people. Although most of the required readings were written by non-Aboriginal historians, knowledge was not restricted to course material. Again, they commented on learning as much outside of the classroom as they did from textbooks or lectures.

They learned about colonization: how Europeans extended domination over the Aboriginal population in North America in order to exploit their natural and human resources. They learned how Aboriginal people were dispossessed from their vast and sacred lands and forced to live on reserves so that a new power of authority – the Indian Act – would increasingly control the people. The ultimate goal was assimilation. They learned of attempts to dismantle their culture by disallowing private land ownership, prohibiting travel off reserves, and outlawing age-old ceremonies.

They spoke about the legacy of colonialism: social problems, abuses, and the violence that is rampant in Aboriginal communities today. The topic of education and, in particular, residential schools was especially significant for the women as they began to recognize aspects of their own lives in the written literature. Grace claimed that for the first time in her school years, she was learning the truth about her reserve, her relatives, her parents, and herself. Julie began to read the newspaper differently when she noticed the signs of the biased viewpoints espoused in the media. She also recognized that prior to coming to university, she accepted the "news" as objective truth and "...bought into what they told me" (#2A).

The information they were learning inside and outside the classroom about Aboriginal people affected them in very personal ways. For example, Charlene recalled the day she was struck by just how personal the information was. In Native Studies 210, the class studied how Europeans came to Western Canada, married the Native women and the way in which those women were treated. For example, it was known that European men who came to Canada often had Aboriginal wives and children despite the fact that they also had families waiting for them back in Europe. In some instances, when the European family arrived in Canada to join their husbands, the Aboriginal family was disowned and discarded. Charlene remembered thinking to herself: "I'm a product of that, and we were looking at it in an historical sense, but I wanted to run out of the classroom. I knew this wasn't just history. This was life today. I married a non-Native man and I know that place...this is now. This is my life" (#1A). Charlene was referring to a 'place' of knowing what it felt like to be married to a 'white' man and to enter his world where many things were foreign and where being Aboriginal set her apart.

I also recall a similar incident of this nature in my own family the day I was told about my father's mother -- my grandmother. I was five years old and can remember my father trying to convince my mother to get into the car with the rest of us. She refused for reasons I did not know at the time, but I found out later that my mother was on her way to introduce herself to my dad's mother, her mother-in-law. Although my parents had been married for eight years and had five children at that time, my father apparently maintained the façade that he was single rather than risk having his mother judge him...or my mother. I believe that this incident speaks volumes about the perception of

prejudice in southern Ontario in 1958. Native Studies courses may present historical information about the history and relations between the incoming settler population and Aboriginal people; however, it is not history that we are removed from. The effects of that history are felt and witnessed in our daily lives.

Karen explained how she was initially reluctant to take Native Studies courses, but in the end was thankful that she did:

> I remember being challenged on those opinions that I had about Native Studies courses as being artsy fartsy courses and not important....I came out of there having learned from my peers and I learned a lot of fundamental issues about identity, cultural traditions, historical things and what the government did to destroy the Indian people. I learned so much from just being in that class, not necessarily from the person up at the front, but from the conversations that were going on around me and what spilled over into ASC, because I could now understand where people were coming from and why it's important to stand up to this or that... why it's relevant to hold on to our traditions and not facilitate further assimilation. (#4B)

Although the knowledge received may have been painful and caused anger within, the women in the study expressed gratitude for *learning the truth*. The knowledge they received contributed to their overall level of confidence. They learned from textbooks, lectures, and from each other. It gave them the ability to respond to the ignorance around them. They were not left feeling as frustrated when people asked questions such as, "What's with you Indians anyway? Why don't you just assimilate?" They acknowledged that their experience provided the tools needed to defend themselves and educate those around them.

Feeling the Pain

Pain was a common theme that emerged from the data, usually in response to new knowledge that affected how participants viewed themselves as Aboriginal people. The women learned that the negative images that shaped their earlier attitudes about Aboriginal people did not necessarily tell the whole story of how the drunken Indian on the street got there. Carol, like many other Aboriginal students at university, first heard about residential schools at university and the extent of devastation inflicted upon Aboriginal people here in Canada and in North America. Prior to studying about the subject, she had mistakenly and naively thought the 'boarding school' that her mother

vaguely spoke about from time to time was some type of elite private school where students were treated well and even spoiled. This truth of her new knowledge caused a great deal of pain.

Janet recalled memories of her mother's behaviour and related it to what she read about residential school, which allowed her to see it in a different light. She began to understand the source of her mother's shame: Nuns in the residential school had beaten her and called her a dirty Indian. In addition, she remembered "coming home one day from school and seeing my mother crying. She told me that she was raped in residential school" (#2B). Janet, angry with her mother throughout most of her adult life, went on to describe the pain that she felt in seeing her mother with 'new eyes'.

Information on residential school caused others to re-live and re-evaluate their past and present lives. As Sylvia said: "It was amazing for me – that whole thing about residential school. It explained a lot to me about the dysfunctional aspects of our people" (#2B). Julie, being an older student, had first-hand experience. She had attended residential school for eight years and admitted not wanting to remember those times, but that became impossible:

> I realized that this [history lesson] was about me... I had to go for a walk and have a cry because I was doing the history of education... and I started writing about residential schools. I'd never articulated what I went through when I was ten years old and [the memories] started coming up. (GC#2)

Julie did not elaborate further about what happened to her when she was ten, but participants in the circle understood and simply nodded supportively.

Researching and writing term papers also triggered pain. As one woman said: "I cried over every paper... there was blood dripping, I'm sure, but I grew... and I learned" (#3A). I remember being in a class in which an Aboriginal student was making a presentation on residential schools. Having been adopted at birth by non-Aboriginal people, he felt largely ignorant about the topic and took the opportunity to learn. He did not expect his research to become personal. John was a big man by any standards. By my guess, he stood 6'1" tall and weighed at least 210 lbs. My heart went out to him on the day of his presentation. Shortly after beginning, his voice cracked and tears welled up in his eyes. John later explained to me over coffee that he had a six year old daughter whom he adored. Whenever he would try to comprehend all those small helpless Native children

being torn away from the safety and comfort of their parents, he found himself wanting to cry because he imagined his own daughter being forcefully removed from his care.

Being Angry

Many of the women felt overpowered by the anger that resulted from *learning the truth*. And they lacked the skills or the means to process their anger in a way that was healthy or constructive. A number of direct quotes demonstrate this point:

> I had all this anger, all this passion and all these questions. I didn't know how to make answers and calm that anger. (#2B)
>
> It's hard to hear the crap that went on to your people. I used to have the hardest time listening without wanting to get up and just scream and say 'you guys took our land, you shit on us and you're still shitting on us. We're still at the bottom rung of the ladder. All the times I scrubbed my goddamn floor, or my house, to try to feel equal to someone else so that I wasn't a dirty Indian. God, what a waste. (#2A)
>
> Where do I go with this shit? Do I go key your car – your goddamn car out there? Do I do that because I'm pissed off at this place because of what you guys have done? Or do I sit there? What do I do with that [rage] stuff? (#2A)

The women often referred to the anger they felt in terms of rage and spoke about the impact that this high level of emotion had on them. Sometimes it affected their ability to focus on their school work and interact appropriately in classroom discussions. One woman remembered one class discussion in particular when an Aboriginal student became so angry that he swore in front of the class. Anger, acted out in this way, can be harmful to both the one directing it and the ones on the receiving end of it. In other words, rather than helping non-Aboriginal people to understand what we think and how we feel, it can deepen their fears and resistance.

Grace became enraged all over again in the circle as stories and memories were recounted: "[In residential school] my uncle had to put his under shorts on his head until they dried. These kinds of painful things were really difficult for me to know and what it did was make me angry ... I had wicked anger" (#2A). I have heard many similar stories of Nuns using these and other abusive and shameful disciplinary tactics with children who broke the rules or, as was the case in Grace's story about her uncle who wet the bed.

Julie complained how she learned things in university that she should have learned in lower school. This made her very angry. In school and on television, 'Indians'

were always portrayed as 'savages' who danced around in circles with tomahawks and as 'heathens' who killed missionaries. The women had not learned anything about Aboriginal people to be proud of. Sylvia elaborated on this point:

> I bought into all the stuff the early years of social studies taught me – that Louis Riel was a traitor, that Christopher Columbus discovered us. I didn't know about Poundmaker, or Chief Joseph, or any of those things. I did know about Pocahontas and Hiawatha though. (#3A)

Being angry was discussed frequently, and each of the women identified many instances where it occurred. Sometimes anger was directed at the institution, or faculty service providers:

> I walked in there [Business faculty] once for help, and this lady was so rude. I just threw their mission statement in her face. I was so angry. I didn't feel welcome, or that I could use them for help. I wondered if she was treating me this way because I am Native. (#4B)

> They [professors] were there because of their research and not for the students. They didn't care about me, or whether I passed or failed. I often ended up leaving [the professor's office] more confused than when I arrived....It felt patronizing and I often left there feeling lost. (#4B)

In my experience, Native Student Services sees a lot of students that, for whatever reason, do not feel comfortable going to their faculty with questions or concerns about their programs. Especially in the first years, students are uncertain of the detailed regulations and requirements laid out in "hundreds of pages of fine print" in the university calendar (#1B). Advisors at Native Student Services understand the difficulty experienced by some students because they likely had the same problem. I recall leaving my own Faculty office several times feeling frustrated and angry at the abrupt and hasty treatment I received, and if it were not for Native Student Services, I might have made the same kind of mistakes in program planning that so many others make. There is nothing more disheartening for students who fill out 'application to graduate' forms at the end of four or more years of university, only to be informed (by mail) that they are not eligible because one or several of their completed courses do not meet requirements.

Elaine felt that her anger was 'free floating' in that she wasn't sure who or what to be angry at. She was angry at herself for her earlier ignorance about Aboriginal history. She remembered feeling shamed by relatives who came in from the reserve and stood out because they dressed funny and talked 'different'. They embarrassed her in front of her

friends. She was angry at her parents for not telling her why her Uncle – a decorated war veteran' lived on the street downtown.

Karen felt mad at the world. She described knowing about her father's brother who committed suicide, but, at the time, no one was allowed to speak of it. Karen could now understand the reasons for this and other family secrets: "I can understand now why there's so many problems out there with Native people being angry... Where do they go with that pain? A lot of times they kill themselves; they go inward" (#2A).

Many spoke about having no outlet for their rage. They simply did not know what to do. The women acknowledged one of the dangers of carrying around 'free floating' anger. It can lead to the same kind of outward expression of racist behaviour that they complain about being inflicted on Aboriginal people: "In some ways it's racist ...damn white people, damn white profs" (GC#1). Elaine, for example, regretted the way she had handled certain situations: "I argued throughout my classes and I don't know if I'm proud of that. In some respects, I think I'm ashamed of that. I think I was angry at the world" (#2A).

Another common situation that evoked a lot of anger for the women in the study was the expectation that an Aboriginal student in the classroom should be knowledgeable concerning all Aboriginal people and therefore be a spokesperson on their behalf. All were familiar with, and could relate to, the 'expert Indian' role when they were singled out by professors to respond to issues, even those questions remotely associated with the entire North American Indigenous population. Most women expressed discomfort with this role, particularly in their initial student years. They felt a lack of knowledge and of confidence in their ability to voice their opinions and concerns. Being placed in this situation caused both embarrassment and anger.

In other instances, being called on as the 'Indian expert' was an additional and resented responsibility: "they expect[ed] me to be this spokesperson and I [was] tired of being the only Native person in these classes. It's wearing to have to be that trail blazer." (#3A). Sylvia referred to it as a 'burden': "I was this token person. In all my classes, people were expecting me to know everything. I'd say 'I'm not Cree' but they'd expect me to know about Cree people and I just felt like it was such a burden" (#2A).

Sylvia 's comment refers to another aspect of this issue of 'Indian expert' -- the assumption that irrespective of tribal background, an Aboriginal student was expected to speak on behalf of all Aboriginal people as if all are the same, having one belief system, culture, or history. One individual responded to this pressure by educating himself in order to more effectively educate others:

> In whatever class I was in, I was always the official Indian, and any time a question was asked about Native culture, regardless of what part of Turtle Island it came from, everybody would turn and look at me. At first, I was offended by that but I thought okay what's happening here? Well, the Creator has put me in a situation where I should know some information and look for some common denominators within Aboriginal cultures in society. I read and learned about treaties and history and their indigenous experience. (GC#3)

Evidently participants struggled with the expert Indian role on campus and adapted to the pressure in various ways. For example, Grace felt that being asked to speak on behalf of all Aboriginal people was too much to expect. She responded with anger and refused to fill the role: "I was healing from my own pain. I didn't feel that kind of strength to be able to fight for the Aboriginal perspective" (#2A). Others, including Sylvia, developed cautious and circumspect responses: "What was hurtful for me in terms of my experiences was that I felt that I did express my thoughts on a few occasions and it cost me in marks" (#2A).

This absence of safety for speaking out and the argumentative nature of classes complicated the women's choices. As Karen noted, one fellow stood up and asked about the small pox infested blankets and the truth about George Washington, but was told there was "no documentation on that and [the Professor] shut down the discussion. In every class, we were having to fight and defend" (#2A). And when they did speak, their questions were not always respected, nor was the response satisfactory. All of these situations resulted in more anger.

Anger was also generated by the perception that people on campus, including fellow students and professors, were somehow uncomfortable with their presence in the classroom: "I had this naïve impression that the university would open their arms to me. Instead it's been a struggle ... one look at me and [I got the impression that] they feel really uptight, really scared and intimidated" (#3A). Karen made a class presentation about Native Education in Canada to which no one responded with either questions or

comments. She interpreted their silence as discomfort with the topic: "This is not statistics and math or that kind of stuff. This is social sciences... It's not from Mars..." (#3A). Karen was angry at the lack of response and went on to say, "Are they protecting themselves from feeling guilty or bad? Maybe it's just easier to maintain stereotypical perceptions about Aboriginal people and to think of them as inferior rather than to accept that we are victims of colonization and the Indian Act" (#3A).

This section has presented themes common to the women after they arrived and became settled into their studies. They spoke of the knowledge they received and the impact that the new information had on them. Learning took place in and outside the classrooms and explained to those who did not previously know about residential schools, for example, why Aboriginal people suffer so many social problems. Learning about these things became a very personal experience, and at some point they came to see the new knowledge in the context of their own lives. Some of the women in the study were deeply affected by the realization that what they were learning was, in fact, about them. Although there was much pain and anger that arose from the experience of learning about their people, in the end, they had a far better understanding of themselves, their families, and their communities.

Finding Support

The women talked at length about the things that helped them to complete their degrees at University. Support came in different forms: from people they met, including peers and professors, and from cultural gatherings such as retreats and ceremonies. They also identified the wider Aboriginal community including 'places' to go for 'refuge' such as Native Student Services and the Aboriginal Student Lounge. Each of these ways of finding support will be discussed in turn.

Being in awe of the University made it difficult for the women to speak with professors, especially to ask for their support when it was needed. At the same time as the women were disillusioned by the ignorance of some professors, they did find support and encouragement from others. As one woman said, "A lot of times it was the profs who were the greatest support" (#2B). This support went a long way in bridging the gaps between the two worlds of being Native and being a university student. Many were pleasantly surprised when a professor demonstrated caring and understanding. Grace

spoke about the support she received during a difficult time in her third year: "I had such a hard time and the instructors were so good... when I lost my sister. That professor left a message on my answering machine every day. The one that meant the most was that he missed me in class" (#3B).

I had a similar experience in my final term on the occasion of my father's death. I traveled home to the funeral in Ontario, and while I was gone, I missed two mid term exams. I obtained the required forms, complete with death certificate, in order to receive permission to write a deferred exam. I remember that one professor's response was not helpful. The other, however, clearly empathized with my pain and offered to help in whatever way he could. Others commented on similar kinds of support received from professors:

> Some of my greatest supporters were my professors... I had one professor cry. She admired what it took for me to get to class. I needed to hear her words. (#3B)
>
> I had two very good profs in the last two years of my undergrad. They were very supportive of me. Even though I didn't write about anything Native in my papers or anything like that, I think they could see a Native perspective in what I was saying. (#2A)

A second source of support came by way of fellow students. Sylvia, for example, admitted that she would have quit if not for the support of her peers: "I made a lot of friendships that provided support for me. I wouldn't have made it without their support. On a lot of occasions, I was going to quit because I couldn't handle it anymore" (#3B). Participants became quite animated when speaking about the positive support received from other students. Peer support took many forms, including the benefit of having others like themselves who were struggling in many of the same ways, to validate their anger and pain. Laughter and camaraderie also offered balance to the difficult feelings and the pressures of their university workload. They drew comfort from knowing that others shared the same feelings and they were all committed to accomplishing the same goal. Peer support added strength to their determination. Without that support, some of the women stated that they were not sure they would have made it through to completion of a degree.

People from the women's 'back home communities' provided a third source of support. Carol described feeling 'privileged' and 'honoured' that she had a First Nation

(band) sponsoring her. She felt a sense of pride in 'belonging' to this First Nation and in exercising her entitlement, her Treaty Right, to an education. The financial support was significant to her, but more importantly, she found great support from regular telephone conversations with an education counsellor. Although Carol had never met this person face-to-face, she felt understood by her counsellor and called her in times of need. The relationship between Carol and her Band grew stronger and added an element of personal responsibility that extended beyond her own needs to that of her home community. As she noted, this new perspective and sense of duty helped to get her through some tough times: "After that 3rd year, I wanted to quit. I just didn't want to go back in September... but I remember thinking that I had to finish. I owed it to myself, I owed this to my band and I owed it to my people" (#5B).

University resources and programs added another source of support to the women. For example, several of the participants began their first year of university in the Transition Year Program (TYP) which offers first-year courses to approximately 50 Aboriginal students per year. This access program is available to non-matriculated Aboriginal students who do not meet all of the entrance requirements for their faculty of choice. It is also the option of choice for those who prefer to begin their university program with the additional support of being in a community of Aboriginal students trying to build a strong foundation for success. This program was a source of support for several women: "In TYP, if it wasn't for the small classes and the support from other students who were in it too and going through a lot of the same experiences, I wouldn't have stayed. It became a determination for all of us to finish all classes" (#2B). TYP provided a sense of comfort and safety, especially for those who came from remote communities and who were intimidated by being in a large city.

Being with other Aboriginal people was a common source of support. Those who entered through the TYP program found that support in their first year. Those who did not enter through TYP sometimes took longer to find and build a sense of community. Regardless of the timing, it is clear that what the women referred to as 'Aboriginal community' was a critical source of support.

> The best experience at the University of Alberta, I can't specifically say Native Student Services and I can't specifically say the Aboriginal Student Council so

> I'm going to have to say the Aboriginal community. They really tried to make an effort for me at any time. They gave me a lot of support and friendship. (#4B)

The Aboriginal Student lounge is situated in a central location on campus. Although not elaborate, the lounge has a kitchen, two computers, a large round table and well worn, comfortable furniture. In addition to providing study space, Aboriginal Student Council (ASC) meetings are held there along with regular potluck lunches. Mostly, students simply go there to be with others like themselves. One woman noted that the "[ASC lounge] was kind of like our territory, our refuge... our space" (#3B).

Native Student Services (NSS) provides assistance to students on a wide range of issues that affect retention and success. Aboriginal advisors at NSS realize how important it is for students to have 'places' on campus where they can feel a sense of belonging, and safety and where they can just 'be'.

In the ASC lounge, or at Native Student Services, the women could be angry, sad, and, especially, free to say what they wanted. It is a place where they were validated in their concerns or fears and where they could draw on the strength or knowledge of students more advanced in their studies.

> No matter how much crap I experienced as a student in a classroom, whether it be with professors, or with textbooks or curricula... in that place [ASC lounge] I could go and be with my peers... It became a place where we debated a lot things. We talked about issues. We supported each other. (#4B)

> We walked through university together. If it wasn't for the Aboriginal people who I was close to, I would have never ever made it. When your day at university is really being crap, all you have to do is walk into the Aboriginal Student Lounge and you're okay because there are other students there who are going through similar things as you're going through and if you help another student it just makes you feel better and feel more connected and more amongst family. (GC#1)

> We used to go there [lounge]to gather and be around people with the same sense of humour, who understand each other, who know the importance of family, who know the stresses, the financial, blah blah blah all those burdens that we carry and we all know it. So being around your own people was such a comfort. (GC#1)

> The [ASC] lounge was a safe place to say things because you didn't have to explain everything. We got what we needed and I could go off to my next class thinking or knowing -- okay I can do it again. (GC#1)

> Even just to be in a room with your own people. You don't even have to have counselling but just to be there with them, there was a sense of home, family and community. There were potlucks lunches and those are the things that got me

through school. There was being with our people and then having people like [Elder] to come and talk to us. (GC#1)

ASC also provides opportunities for cultural and ceremonial activities, for example, an annual pow wow and Native Awareness Days. For many of the women, these activities were a new experience and ones that provided support through ceremony and prayer. Grace credits these activities, and other such events, with giving her a sense of her people and culture: "I started going to [cultural] retreats, sweats, using sweetgrass and sage. I started for the first time feeling like I did belong. I found myself belonging, and fitting in, and finding the strength in people" (#3B).

Without the experience of coming to university, and meeting Aboriginal people in this environment, the women believed that they would not have been exposed to aspects of their culture such as language, sweat lodge and pipe ceremonies, and teachings from the Elders. As one woman said, "It's because of university that I found the talking circle" (#2B). In other words, the university provided a place, or the means, to find cultural support.

Karen remembered her initial behaviour after listening to an Elder speak. As she shared in the circle, she laughed at how her 'white' thinking resulted in her approaching an Elder after one of the 'circle gatherings' and asking the Elder to repeat the words from her prayer. Karen wanted to write out the words. The Elder responded kindly and firmly, "Each of us must come up with our own words, thoughts, and feelings in their own prayers" (GC#1).

Elders occasionally visited campus to sit with students in 'circle', to listen to and support those who were struggling. They offered prayers and cultural teachings to help students understand why it was important for them to be where they 'are at'. In short, the Elder's sharing their life experiences and traditional wisdom allowed the women in this study to better understand life itself, to look beyond their immediate problems, and to envision themselves as part of a bigger picture.

The women were often emotional and even teary-eyed as they described their feelings surrounding these initial encounters with ceremony or elders: "When I found this road and I found this place, I sat and cried because I was home. I knew I didn't have to look anymore" (#1A). For Julie, who had carried deep shame and guilt, finding the

support of Elders and ceremony resulted a tremendous feeling of 'wholeness'. Another women said it this way:

> I was just craving their teachings...I gobbled it up. I saw ceremonies that I didn't believe still existed like the water drum ceremony. I'll never forget how I felt as we participated in that. It was so powerful. (#2A)

For Elaine, university provided a positive community of Aboriginal people with a desire to improve themselves, their families, and their communities, which contrasted with her previous exposure to Aboriginal people that had been limited to the negative stereotypes so frequently portrayed in the media. In her words, "[university] was the start of a whole new journey for me that was really good. If it wouldn't have been for university, I don't know how I would've met Native people" (#2A). Cultural support invariably led to personal growth, to greater confidence. It ultimately enabled the women to achieve a new pride in themselves as Aboriginal people.

Summary

Four themes were identified in Chapter Six: *learning the truth, feeling the pain, being angry*, and *finding support*. Each theme describes an aspect of the women's experiences following their initial entry to university. The women spoke at length about *learning the truth* about Aboriginal history and issues such as colonization and residential schools. This knowledge was the source of overwhelming pain and fierce anger. They began to understand that today's social problems among Aboriginal communities are directly related to the systems that were imposed. These emotions, amongst other things, incited a deep and extensive self-exploration. Support for their personal and academic journey on campus came from professors, and outside professionals, and, in particular, they identified the Aboriginal community as their greatest source of support. In particular, Native Student Services and the Aboriginal Student Council provided a place on campus that could nurture their interests in Aboriginal issues and identity.

CHAPTER VII. FINDING MY PLACE

Where Chapter Five and Chapter Six addressed the early and middle stages of the university experience, this final chapter of the data analysis discusses the ways that the women came to terms with their university experience. *Finding understanding* describes their appreciation of Aboriginal people and community, including their immediate and extended families. The themes of *finding voice* and *finding myself* elaborate the personal struggle and search for identity as Aboriginal persons and women. Finally, *finding wholeness* draws together the various aspects of self definition as they emerged from the data.

Finding Understanding

Understanding came in many ways. It came from learning history from an Aboriginal perspective, especially North American Aboriginal history. Colonization, residential schools and the Indian Act name a few of the more significant historical factors. Understanding came from textbooks, lectures, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, both inside and outside of the classroom. This knowledge helped the women to understand Aboriginal people in general, and more specifically, it helped them to understand their communities, their families and themselves.

The history of colonization and its impact on Aboriginal people explained current situations such as why there are the social problems faced by Aboriginal people in Canada and around the world. Charlene commented on the strength it gave her to know that her ancestors had the foresight to ensure that future generations of Aboriginal children would be full participants in society by having the Treaty right to obtain an education within the 'newcomers' educational institutions.

> What gave me strength when I felt like I can't take it anymore is remembering those old ones who have gone on, who asked for education rights to be put into the treaties. That came from them and they recognized that this was valuable for our communities... that we needed to be in these institutions. (GC#3)

The women pointed out that knowledge of Aboriginal history and culture received at this stage of their education was new information and greatly appreciated. The women spoke about how they no longer felt ashamed, guilty or confused about responding to accusations, insinuations or racist remarks. Julie spoke to the power of knowledge:

> You know the kind of power I'm talking about – knowledge gave me that. Knowledge gave me the answers to my friends asking me "Who the hell do you think you guys are? My ancestors came here from the Ukraine and they worked their asses off and that's why they've got what they've got – you guys– you get your cheque..." You know the rhetoric. I didn't have an answer back then. I knew there was something but I didn't have the words. That's the power I got here. I have to thank this place for that. (#2A)

Although the women were angry that they did not acquire knowledge of Aboriginal people in elementary and high school, they were thankful for finally learning positive things about the culture and history of Aboriginal people:

> I learned a lot of things that I should've learned in lower school. I should've learned all of that stuff growing up and I didn't. I had to come here to get it...so that's my gift. (#3A)

> What does assimilation mean? I didn't know that until I came here. What's colonization? What's imperialism? What is inherent...there's so many words. I didn't have that. I had to come here – we didn't have that before as Native students. (#2A)

Janet spoke about one textbook in particular and how she was grateful for it and to the professor for including it on the required reading list for his Canadian Studies course:

> I was looking for the Native content but I saw nothing about Native people.... As it turned out the readings that he gave us, was a gift to me —*Maps and Dreams*. ...He's probably far away from Indians but you know his heart is there...he was getting the message across...I'd come full circle in that class. (#2A)

Karen also described a textbook that changed her life, *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* by Celia Haig-Brown (1992). She said, "that textbook was the first book I read that included the voices and stories of real Aboriginal people; our people, and I carried it around and used it in so many of my papers. It helped me to understand a lot of things (#3B).

Acquiring information and knowledge about Aboriginal history meant that the women developed a curiosity towards their own communities and families. They sought out relatives and other community members and questioned them concerning family and community history. One woman told a story her father shared with her. Julie's father was one amongst a large group of Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their parents' home in the 1950s and transported to a TB sanatorium hundreds of miles away. He stayed there for three years and suffered the same kinds of abuse that were spoken of by

survivors of residential schools, such as being punished for speaking an Aboriginal language. This knowledge of her father's experience had deep meaning for Julie and those of us in the circle who were unaware of the extent to which Aboriginal people had been hospitalized in TB sanatoriums. Today, it remains a relatively unknown part of our history.

In short, the women grew to understand their families better. Learning about colonialism in general and about the residential school experience, for example, brought Karen to an understanding of why her parents were ashamed of being Native, why she was not taught to speak her Native language, and why her uncle committed suicide. She gained greater understanding of the roots of poverty and despair. The causes of biased and racist education in public schools became more evident and she said that she now also understood why there were so many Aboriginal people who lived on the drag.

The women came to understand the roots of violence in their families. Grace explained a changed perspective of her mother after taking Native Studies courses: "I used to get so angry at her for passing on her shame to us, but now I know that it was also her means of survival because the only way she knew to be happy was to leave her Indianness behind" (#2A). As a result of residential school, Carol understood that her mother had learned few parenting skills that would have helped her raise children in a loving and healthy way. Carol was no longer confused or angry with her mother for the way she was raised as a child because she understood the reasons for her mother's behaviour. In fact, she now feels compassion and sympathy for her mother as a direct result of understanding the history and impact of residential schools.

Charlene spoke about gaining a new understanding of the small town community she grew up in, where all the businesses were owned by white people. As a child, Charlene thought that the difference between white people and Indians had something to do with Aboriginal people being inferior. Although she did not carry this belief throughout her entire adult years, it was at university that she understood the forces preventing Aboriginal people from participating equally in society. For example, Treaty Indians had not been allowed to own land, or acquire bank loans to start businesses or purchase equipment. The fact that all the businesses in town were owned by white people

was not the fault of Aboriginal people and in fact, Aboriginal people were the victims of deeply rooted prejudice and paternalistic government policies.

I recall a friend's father telling a story about returning from the World War II. At the time, veterans were able to lay claim to parcels of land as part of a veterans' assistance program. My friend's father was continuously denied access to the piece of land he requested. Despite the fact that this veteran was raised on this land, and it therefore held personal significance for him, it was eventually sold to a non-Aboriginal person and today it is a valuable piece of property. Many Aboriginal veterans never received their entitlements and for this reason are currently seeking an apology and compensation from the Canadian government. These and other important stories of Aboriginal people's history remain largely untold.

Elaine understood that the sexual abuse in her family and community originated, at least in part, from residential schools. Rather than continue to carry the anger, pain and shame of her own abuse and that of family members or community people who were perpetrators of the abuse, she was able to understand the entire issue as a cycle of violence. In total, the knowledge Elaine received changed the way she viewed her life:

> I learned so much about me personally, about my culture, my family, and I found my identity ironically in those concrete walls and the space of that campus. Every step I took was like I was taking a step back to me and who I am. (#2B)

Finding Voice

The women commented on the impact of the University experience on their voice. Some of them said that being at university forced them—or at least pushed them—to speak up. Where some of them started out being fearful of speaking up in class, somewhere along the way, they learned and acquired the needed confidence:

> I think I found some self-esteem, pride in myself... the ability to use my voice... wanting to use my voice. (#3A)
>
> That's what I love about university is that it gave us the opportunity to have that voice. (#2A)

Knowledge and support gave them the tools they needed and the university environment provided the opportunity to find and use their voices. "I now have enough answers that I can speak my truth and my throat will open now so I can speak. It wouldn't before" (#2A). Using their voice had to do with recognizing they had something

to say. Once they understood Aboriginal history and learned to think clearly about information or issues, they were no longer stuck for ways to respond to ignorance, or ways to write their opinions and perspective. Grace credits her university experience with "waking up all the passions that previously [she] had no words for" (#4B).

The women in the study realized that they had something to say and something to contribute. Even though they did not appreciate always having to educate others, or being the expert in the class, they learned to accept the role and take responsibility for speaking out. Ultimately, university led them to a place where they were comfortable with themselves and confident in their abilities; a place where their Aboriginal identity was no longer perceived as shameful or as a burden:

> [I could] stand proud as a Native person in my work for the first time. ... Rather than being embarrassed at having to be the authority [in class], I was standing up and saying who I was and saying, I can't speak for all Native people, but I can speak for myself and this is how I feel. I learned not to be ashamed. (#2A)

Their earlier absence of voice when they had first arrived at university contrasted with who they are now as a result of the experience:

> You start by going to all these classes in the beginning of your journey in university knowing that you have to start saying something and that comes at the end. (#4B)
>
> I am a different person than the day I walked into this University. I didn't have a voice before. I didn't speak up. I didn't do a lot of things. Today I have a strong voice and I use it with a vengeance. (#3B)
>
> That voice grows every year and it becomes more independent and makes you think you just want to go on [learning]. That journey is never going to end for me. (#4B)
>
> I started to have an identity...and a voice and I started to stand up to the racism. (#2B)

Others spoke to the responsibility and obligation they felt to speak up in class because they felt it was important to present their perspective about Aboriginal people to classmates. The women did not want other students accepting textbook information as necessarily truthful about Aboriginal people: "I really needed to have a voice...I could speak out and I could say something and I had to. There was a lot of times I had to and it wasn't just to profs" (#2B). Carol, in particular, mentioned countless times when she found herself "having to educate" instructors, including "highly respected" individuals

with Ph.D.s. As she said, "It's a part of our journey to do that and I accept [the responsibility]" (#4B). Janet felt that Aboriginal students have an obligation to speak up in class because not doing so carried serious implications:

> I was terrified that the students were going to go out with these ideas that they were speaking about in class, and that they were going to go out and share [with others]. And they had it so wrong and being one of the only Aboriginal students in many of my Anthro classes, we're put there to say something I think. (#2B)

Once students acquire accurate knowledge about their history and the ability to think critically, they are in a position to speak up against racism and ignorance. However, being the only Aboriginal student in a class influences their ability to take these kinds of risks. I did not acquire the confidence to speak up in class until well into my second or third year. When I speak to students about this issue, I remind them of the following words spoken by an Elder who said that life is about seeking, speaking and standing by your truth. Then I tell them that the confidence to speak out comes in time.

At the same time as the university environment provided an opportunity for the women to gain knowledge and to speak up, it also presented them with a predominantly Western or Euro-centric point of view. As students learned to speak up, they developed a keen and alert sense of the implications of this perspective:

> While I was there it felt like the university was trying to turn me into a little clone and I would come out the others side, like a white person being assimilated totally. And I knew that that's not what I wanted to be because I knew when I finished that I wanted to go back and help my people in some way. And so I had to really struggle to stay with who I was. (GC#1)

Others commented on similar aspects relating to the conflict between worldviews including ways of teaching and learning: "Part of how we [Aboriginal people] learn is through repetition. That's how we learn the ceremonies, the prayers, songs and all of that. We've heard it over and over again and we don't get that in school" (GC#1). Carol agreed with Sylvia and used very strong language to describe her feelings about the lack of choice that university offers persons from non-Western cultures. One can sense the pain and anger in her words and voice.

> Being here at this university, this institution, it's simply an extension of residential schools because we still do not have the choice to be spoken to and taught in our own language. We don't have that choice in the curriculum, in

> developing our programs and... we're still participating in our own colonization just by being here. (GC#2)

They understood what pain and anger is all about. In the end, they also understood the purpose for it in terms of their own lives. The purpose had to do with learning about themselves by reconciling the parts of themselves that were in conflict. Accepting the pain and anger that surfaced in their experience at university, rather than avoiding or denying their feelings, allowed the women to move beyond anger and pain to a place of finding and embracing themselves.

Finding Self

Although the women valued the knowledge they acquired at university, they did not focus on the academic information as the most important aspect of their education. Instead, they elaborated on the personal aspects of their journey, some aspects of which were related to academic studies, and the knowledge that helped them to discover more about themselves, their families and their people.

> When I came out of here, I didn't come out saying 'oh, I value the academic education I learned'. What I honour is how much more I learned of myself. That's the gift I got out of university. (#3A)

The women compared their self perceptions when they arrived at university with their self perceptions at the point of completing undergraduate degrees. They clearly expressed a change towards greater self understanding and acceptance of their Aboriginal heritage and identity:

> I started going to sweats and burning sweetgrass. I started learning about myself and discovering some things about myself spiritually. (#2B)

> I know that a lot of students do come here and find their culture and find out who they are. I get overwhelmed by it every time it happens, because I know what it's like to be so lost... and then to know who you are. (#2A)

Sylvia, angry at 'organized religion' as a result of residential school, was able to reconcile that anger and "come full circle to embrace spirituality in a new way" (#5B). She spoke at length about having an identity for the first time: "For me the university experience was such an integral part of discovering my identity and claiming it" (#1B). Almost all of the women described the university experience as a time of extensive personal growth:

> There was a lot of personal growth going on for me... it's a real personal journey... forced me to find out who I was. (#2B)
>
> You're going through so much in your education journey and you're learning so much about yourself and your identity and who you are as a person." (#2B)
>
> University brought me so many things. I loved that I had an identity for the first time in my life. (#2A)
>
> When I look back, I think the best thing about my university experience and the years that I spent there was discovering who I was, seeing how I'd changed and the person that I'd become and knowing that if I didn't have those experiences, I'd still be an unhappy and unhealthy person. (#4B)

The women's new-found pride in their heritage coincided with a growing sense of personal strength, particularly with being Aboriginal women. Several of them claimed it was other women who had been helpful along the way and contributed to a change in their perceptions of Aboriginal women, including themselves. Sylvia, for example, overcame her mistrust of women based on earlier experiences with older sisters who had mistreated her. She felt that her university experiences with other women "made it okay for [her] to be a woman again" (GC#2). Having been sexually abused as a young girl, Grace had never felt positive about being female until she overcame those old feelings and learned to respect and appreciate the predominance of women who contributed to her success:

> My experience at university was a healing experience for me and purely a female experience in some sense because the people that I got the closest to who understood me and nurtured me academically and personally and even my therapist —they were all females. (#2B)

Others commented extensively on the importance of finding new meaning in and understanding of, being Aboriginal women:

> As women who bring life to life, we are the ones who carry the living culture from one generation to the next. That's a big honour and a big responsibility — I think we have to have more faith not just in Creator but in ourselves. (GC#2)
>
> Looking back has helped me realize that my years at university was a journey through who I am, what I am, what I can accomplish —as a woman, as an Aboriginal women — and how rooted I've become in my community. (#5B)
>
> As Aboriginal women we are so strong... earning a degree here gives a sense of academic empowerment, a sense of spiritual empowerment and because of what I learned, I think it is society empowerment... women can do things, change things. (#5B)

The women were moved by the written and spoken words of Aboriginal women authors and scholars. Elaine, for example, shed a few tears the day she heard Monica Sinclair speak at the Indigenous Scholars' conference in 1995 and has never forgotten her words: "I wrote those words down and carried them around in my purse to read every time I got discouraged." Sinclair said, "We, as Aboriginal people, all have stories and through telling those stories we can all be scholars" (#2B). My friend described the beauty of finding 'shiny, multi-faceted jewels' among the endless pages of scholarly works. She was referring to the joy of finding books and articles written by Aboriginal women scholars whose work, and accompanied personal meaning, was a welcome relief from much of the academic work written by white male authors.

The women who had experienced judgements and racism among their own people came to an understanding of these issues, including their sources. Some of the women who had earlier felt insecure about being Aboriginal said that the university experience helped to resolve their fears and doubts. Grace, for example, is no longer affected by name calling: "There's still those Aboriginal people who will say you're not Indian enough right? It just doesn't matter anymore because you know who you are" (#4B). Charlene expressed her agreement this way:

> I used to be scared to go home because I was fostered out when I was young. I'm not visibly Native and didn't have any identity to anchor to. It's because of being at university that I can now get excited about going home. There isn't really any place now where I'm not confident to go. (#4B)

Whereas Karen remembers being embarrassed, confused and wanting to hide the fact that she came into university through the Transition Year Program (TYP) for Aboriginal students, she has since changed her mind: "I thought that people used to think I came in the back door so I didn't tell them I was in TYP. Now you could stamp it on my back" (#5B).

The women credited the overall value of their university experience for teaching them specific skills such as critical thinking skills. They learned to read 'between the lines' for understanding and to recognize bias or poorly articulated points of view. As Karen noted, "From University I've learned critical thinking —how to question and analyze. Before going to university, I would read books and see movies without questioning. Now I notice things I didn't notice before" (#4B). As evidence of her

acquired skills, Karen went on to describe the way that the media reinforced her own negative stereotypes about Aboriginal people by predominantly reporting on the negative events when they could easily balance such information with positive events. Another summed up her growth, as a result of university, this way: "There is a whole gradual process of development. It was like another life or another childhood. I went from having new toys and having fun playing with all my friends to being an adult where I can use my books and think critically" (#4B).

The women recognized a need for help to work through personal experiences of anger and pain, and to reconcile the initial confusion that many Aboriginal students experience at university. Sylvia said it well: "The big mistake of ours is trying to do it on our own because if it is our direction, we have to be humble and ask for help" (#5B). I needed and received help during my undergraduate degree. Being a student and a single parent of two teenagers meant that my time was limited. I remember, as an undergraduate student, often reading and studying late into the night and in all of my spare time; however, in spite of those long hours, I recall walking into exams lacking confidence. In fact, I always thought 'I could fail'. I never did fail an exam or come close to failing a course, but that fear never went away. Several years later, while attending a graduation luncheon for Aboriginal students, I listened to a student speak about 'pouring' over her books year after year while sitting at the kitchen table. She described looking up one day to realize that her children were grown up, and she expressed sadness at the sacrifices that she and other adult students must make, especially where children are concerned. We miss a lot. I too grieve those years when I wasn't available to my children in the way that they needed me to be, or in the way that I imagine a 'good mother' would be.

Returning to the notion of needing help during university years, it is important to note that help is fundamental to the nature of being a 'student'. By definition, a student is one who is learning, who both needs and has the right to receive help. Some aspects of the help required originates within the university —for example, Native Student Services (NSS), professors, and libraries. Other kinds of help came from friends, family and community. I received help from the women in my life, especially my mother. She lived with me during my undergraduate years and helped financially, spiritually, and emotionally. When she left, she made sure that I maintained a connection with her friends

who belonged to a 'family lodge' and held regular ceremonies, teaching circles and other gatherings. Those women became an important source of support and guidance. They helped me discover cultural teachings that have sustained my health and wholeness to this day.

Finding Wholeness

Wholeness is a concept that is presented in several ways. First, it is discussed in terms of personal wholeness including the mental, emotional, spiritual and physical aspects of the self. Each of the four elements is interconnected and inseparable from each other and from the whole. In the same way, the aspect of time—past, present and future—are interconnected elements of our lives and thus important to the discussion of wholeness. We are connected to our ancestors and also the children not yet born. Each are important to our survival and well-being in the present. The final way that wholeness will be discussed is in the aspect of relationship—self', family and community. Many of the women claimed that they found their culture, identity and pride within the Aboriginal community on campus and learned to value their families in new ways. Each of the above dimensions of 'wholeness' describes ways that university contributed to the women's experience as a whole.

Aspects of Self

Certainly students enter university with the expectation that they will be challenging their minds. In fact, much of university work focuses on the intellectual part of the 'self'. Students read hundreds of books, listen to countless lectures and write numerous term papers during the four years of undergraduate study. Without a doubt, these cognitive tasks exercise their mental capacity and the women noted this academic knowledge they received as invaluable. Although they did express their gratitude to the university for strengthening their cognitive ability, for the most part, they remembered other aspects of their learning: they remembered the emotional and spiritual impact of the experience.

The women in the study spoke about what they learned and experienced that affected them in an emotional way. As discussed in Chapter Five and Six, the women felt anger and pain as they learned about the history of Aboriginal people and began to

understand its impact on themselves and their families. Grace spent a lot of time angry and being depressed. Julie remembers getting highly emotional while watching a video called *Daughters of the Country* and realizing it told the story of her ancestors: "I was ready to cry...I wanted to just run out" (#2A). The women spoke about the times they were learning and doing their academic work. These intense experiences, described by Karen as "blood dripping", occurred especially during the process of researching and writing course papers (#2A).

They also spoke with fondness about the positive emotions that the experience evoked such as the love and support they received and gave while attending university. In retrospect, these positive feelings seemed to overshadow the pain they encountered along the way. The women, at the time of this study, had come to understand the purpose of emotional pain and anger: precipitators of change, of healing towards wholeness. In fact, many of the women were grateful for the opportunity for "personal growth", albeit a sometimes difficult process:

> I give thanks for all those painful things I experienced here. (#2A)
>
> With all this stuff, I ended up in therapy and I thank the creator for that. (#2B)
>
> Organized religion was a part of my anger and I remember reconciling that stuff. (#1A)

Many of the women credit the university experience with bringing them in touch with elders, ceremonies and cultural knowledge. Some mentioned that they did not believe they would have found these otherwise. As Elaine said: "I truly mean it when I said that university saved my life ...I really truly don't know what I would've done if I didn't go" (#2B). We all understood what she meant by 'university's life saving quality.' Janet in particular nodded, and responded: "I could never say I hated university because if I wasn't here, I might not be alive. And so it's sacred and I owe that to university...I'm honoured" (#2A). Charlene commented that despite the conflict she encountered on campus, she could 'run back to the culture' because this 'place' where she encountered cultural teachings of kindness and honesty gave her a sense of where she belonged.

Many encountered the spiritual aspect of themselves for the first time. Karen, for example, participated in ceremonies like the water drum ceremony, that she believed no longer existed: "I'll never forget that [ceremony] and how I felt as we participated. It was

so powerful" (#3A). Carol also credits the university experience with providing much more than intellectual stimulation: "University is just a 'place' but what came from there is so much more. I have my friends. I have spiritual guidance. I have access to things that I normally think I wouldn't have had access to" (#3B).

I rely heavily on spiritual prayer to help me through the times when I feel stuck in my writing and I call on the grandmothers from the other side to come close and help guide me. Prior to entering this graduate program, I fasted in the bush for four days—no food and no water—so that I would know if the First Nations Graduate Program was the right way for me to go. I also know when I am getting too far away from my 'spirit', and off balance from working only from my head, that it is time to offer tobacco to an elder for a ceremony.

Some attributed their wellness to the culture and the value of knowing their place within the culture: "What I did value in all that turmoil was running back to the culture and knowing this is my place. This is where I understand". Sylvia claims that her survival and success was the result of cultural healing:

> When I left that first sweat, I knew I'd found home. I felt like I belonged for the first time....university and the culture and traditions kind of went hand in hand. My healing seems to have come from the university... my sobriety... my self-esteem. (GC#2)

Groups of students began organizing and attending sweats and holding regular talking circles that offered support and helped them manage all their responsibilities. For example, many adult Aboriginal students often have responsibilities to their children and their parents and other members of an extended family. Many of the women spoke about the importance of learning cultural ways: "I started needing to be a part of talking circles and being with other Aboriginal students. And all the sweats and definitely going through your own healing journey. You're doing so much as a student as part of a family, plus you're healing yourself." (#2B)

Some of the women spoke about the impact of cultural teachings and university on their physical health as well. In some instances, coming to university helped to deal with an addiction. We have seen how some said that it 'saved their lives'. In retrospect, one woman believed she had been 'on a road' to self destruction:

> The stress of being angry at the world got to the point where I couldn't manage my life, so I drank even more ... But they'd always told me that if I was going to sweat, I'd have to give up drinking. This is how I knew I really had a problem because I debated it within myself. (#2A)

Janet was able to quit drinking, and with the encouragement of her Aboriginal friends, she entered therapy. As a result, she believed "in a way, university brought me my healing... The sobriety brought me so many things. It brought me freedom" (#3A). Karen had a similar story to tell: "Sometimes I think, 'what would I be like if I hadn't quit drinking? I think I wouldn't be a person on this earth anymore and so I think of my life starting in terms of university" (#1A). Julie also alluded to her unhealthy lifestyle and the destructive behaviour of substance abuse that could have ended in an early death. "I don't know where I'd be right now if it weren't for university. I don't think I'd be here, or else I'd be a very unhealthy person, a very angry and sad person" (GC#2).

Sylvia concluded that obtaining a degree was a test of physical endurance, in particular when her husband became ill from diabetes: "here I was taking five courses, and having to assume all the responsibility in the house, responsibility of driving, responsibility of taking care of my husband, taking care of my son, everything" (#4B). Julie also made reference to the physical challenges that she faced as a student. Because her in-laws were very critical of her returning to school, she wished to avoid the possibility of them finding fault with her for not living up to her responsibilities at home. Consequently, she would begin working on school 'stuff' only after her daughter was in bed: "I remember countless times being up all night... I learned beyond just academic, I learned about myself, my spirit" (#2B).

Aspects of Time

Discovering knowledge about the past brought new meaning into their present day lives, so discovering the past was an important part of the journey to 'wholeness' for the women. They reconciled and understood their individual past, their childhood experiences and that of their parents, in the context of the history of Aboriginal people. All of this learning helped Grace break the 'cycle of abuse' to experience 'wellness' and to raise her children without violence.

Many of them discovered parts of their ancestral culture remained alive and that by participating in ceremonies they could honour those ancestors and relatives: "It gives

me strength when I feel I can't take it anymore to remember those old ones who have gone on. They asked for education rights to be put into the treaties..." (GC#3). Karen feels compelled to keep the past alive today: "I feel a great responsibility because of [my grandfather] and how hard he fought for our people to have an education" (#4B). She went on to elaborate: "When I talk about my ancestors I feel a connection to my grandfather because I know he's watching over me" (#4B). Julie believes this connection to her past has played a role in her overall spiritual, emotional and holistic health, and ultimately, has helped her successfully complete her degree.

The university experience provided the tools Carol now uses to address ignorance and stereotypes in her daughter's school: "I find myself right on key if anything happens. Like on Thanksgiving, they had a very stereotypical cartoon character of an Indian girl in braids on the door and I had to say something - the teachers had no idea what's wrong with that image" (#4B). She went on to say that she understands the importance of helping students be proud of who they are and "...know that there are Native heroes" (#3B).

In the final circles, Janet spoke with hope and enthusiasm about the future: "I'm so looking forward to using what I've learned, getting a job and choosing a career...I'm anxious to see what I'm going to do now, see what my potentials are, see how far I can go." Numerous others spoke about future benefits of their degrees and other accomplishments:

> Why are we doing this? I think it's for my little one...for the road that she's going to go on. I want her to have her own voice, to be on that good path and see that this way of life is here for her. (#4A)
>
> When I found this road and I found this 'place', I sat and I cried because I was home I knew I didn't have to look anymore and I could bring my daughter up in this. She'll be brought up in pride. (#4A)
>
> The future for me is very exciting. It gives my children a fighting shot at being who they are. And that's all we can do as parents, is give them the tools and the space to become who they are and what their spirit needs to be. (#4B)
>
> Every night when I would lay down and put [daughter] to sleep, I would think this child is going to be somebody. I'm really excited to see our children grow and the changes, and what's going to become of them because of the steps we've taken as parents with our education. (#5B)

This model of wholeness includes a way to see ourselves in relation to the world around us. I am told, by Elders, that our responsibility in life begins with the 'self' and extends outward to our families and to the wider community.

The women spoke of developing a relationship with themselves. Carol, for example, came to university without a sense of herself. She had married very young and believed that her husband could 'save her': "Right from then in my teenage years, I began to separate who I was" (#2A). Carol never knew who she was. She felt lost until she became a student. At university, the women learned more about who they were, including their strengths, weaknesses and dreams. For these women, coming to university was the catalyst to their healing:

> University is where I began to heal and where I began to learn not just academically but about understanding myself. (GC#2)
>
> University changed my life... That period was more important in terms of my personal growth and healing than any other. (GC#1)

Many of the women shared beautiful stories. They spoke with tears and fondness about their memories and of being changed in so many ways. They said university allowed them to reconcile the shame and the confusion about being Aboriginal, to heal from the loneliness of not knowing where they belonged or feeling like they belonged no where.

Again, the women mentioned the notion that university saved their lives and provided the opportunity to learn and be themselves. Janet, for example, said it this way: "I know university saved my life. I was a little Indian girl from a little reserve outside the city. [At university] I started using my real name and when I took my identity back, and I could know who I was" (GC#1). She simply needed a way to remove layers of defensive protection, to uncover those parts that were her all along. University was the means to accomplish that task for Janet and others in the study.

> Walking in balance was impossible to do in university. So it was just amazing learning about the culture. It helps to strengthen your sense of yourself, who you are. The whole thing about validation, confidence, all of those things that we struggle with. (GC#1)

> University began a healing for me....It was so validating for me to be there and be with other Aboriginal students... experiencing the same growth, healing, and learning. It was so validating." (GC#2)

In addition to developing a stronger relationship with themselves, some women formed strong ties with people they met at university. These relationships sometimes became like family: "I found myself belonging, fitting in and finding strength in people. The people that I met, forged bonds with, I don't think that time and distance can break" (#3B). Julie credits one person in particular with confronting her about her unhealthy lifestyle and steering her in a new direction. She referred to him as her 'new brother': "The man that introduced me to this way I call him my brother and I credit him with saving my life. If I had not run into him here, I don't know where I'd be...He pulled me out of that mess" (#4A).

Relationships with birth families also changed. Elaine, for example, came to appreciate her 'blood' family and wished to reinforce those old ties: "I realize how much my brother did push me and help me and he needs to hear that" (#3B). Charlene realized how important her family was to her: "The connection that we have to our family is also to our people. ...it's our connection to our roots" (#3B).

University was where Carol acquired a sense of community for the first time, and those relationships were an important part of her 'journey': "University was a journey through who I am, what I am, and where I stand...in my community, as a woman, and especially as an Aboriginal woman. I've become rooted within my community" (#3B). The support she received at convocation was symbolic:

> Finding support in places I didn't expect it - that's been the gift for me. At convocation an Elder (stranger though) came up to me and said in my ear "I'm so proud of you" and I started to cry. That was from my people. That was the crowning glory that day, just to hear that, just for us to support one another. (#4A)

Belonging to a community was essential to Grace's success at university: "Even just to be in a room with your own people. You don't have to have counselling but just to be there with them, there was a sense of home, family and community" (#1GC). Some attributed a large part of their success to this 'sense of community' they found and to the validation that came from being with, from listening or sharing with, others like themselves:

> I did a lot of healing from just the readings and lectures and from listening to other students because they seemed to be the greatest educators to me. Listening to what they were going through was important, so that I didn't feel like it was only me. (#2B)

Janet described having 'the best cry' one day when she realized pain and anger were in her life for a reason —to push or motivate her to figure out where she belonged, "I now understand why I'm here" (#2B). Janet learned to respect the culture and realized the need to stay close to her Elders. As she saw it, one day she would return to her community and refocus her anger and channel her energy in a productive way to help her people:

> I'm empowered. I feel powerful. I feel like I went through birth to adulthood again. It was just like a maturation process of some things that weren't mature in my mind, my spirituality, my social structure, these things weren't mature when I went in. What does assimilation, colonization, imperialism, inherent mean? I didn't know what that meant until I came here...all that was part of me...part of my life and I didn't know. (#4A)

Ultimately, the women spoke about the need for balance among all these aspects of themselves and their lives and the need to find a way where they could honour all parts of themselves, their lives and all their relations. Many came full circle in their feelings towards themselves, their families and Aboriginal people in general. They came to a place of 'belonging' and a connection to 'all their relations': "I have this strong need to try and share what I've learned with people in my community or my home... All of this will contribute to a better tomorrow and to our children and grandchildren yet unborn" (#5B). As the women wrapped up the final circle, they spoke about Aboriginal identity being the key to their experience. Their great sense of accomplishment of a hopeful future mingled with sadness as their university experience drew to a close. Karen summed it up this way:

> I lost a lot and gained a lot while I was here. It's why I love this place [university] so much. I don't want to leave it. I think that's why it was so sad to walk across that stage and get my feather. I remember every step I took as a student to get to that feather. (#3B)

Summary

This chapter discussed the final stages of the university experience in terms of what the women found as a result of completing their degree. They found understanding of factors that contributed to their own identity in the history of North America. They

developed an understanding of how that history impacts Aboriginal people today, including the ways it affected their communities, their families and themselves. The women spoke about finding voice or gaining the confidence to speak up about how they felt, and they talked about gaining a new understanding of being Aboriginal. Although it was sometimes perceived as added pressure in the university experience, they learned to accept responsibility because they were proud of who they were. In other words, going to university helped them to find themselves in new ways that enabled them to embrace their heritage and traditions. They found those things through the Aboriginal community, especially the Aboriginal community on campus. In the end, the women described ways that university helped them to find wholeness mentally, spiritually, physically and emotionally.

CHAPTER VIII. FINAL REFLECTIONS

Overview

This study began with the following question: How do selected female Aboriginal graduates from the University of Alberta describe the university experience generally, and in particular, its impact on their personal and cultural sense of identity as Aboriginal people. For the purpose of this study, identity refers to the lived experience of being Aboriginal, and therefore relies on the individual's willingness or desire to self identify as such.

The inquiry method was based on a traditional Aboriginal interaction process, the talking circle. As I explored the many research strategies available within the qualitative methodological framework it became evident that the best research strategy for this project was to be found in this traditional form. I invited nine people who were experienced in both post secondary education and traditional talking circles to assist and guide in designing the research process, the research sequence, and the specifics of the research method. These first sets of talking circles I called Guidance Circles. Based on direction from the Guidance Circle process, eight Aboriginal women who had graduated from the University of Alberta participated in a series of Story Gathering Circles and gave each other and me their stories. These stories, supplemented by the accounts of experiences of Guidance Circles members and the experiences of the researcher as a participant, constitute the data for this research.

The group members came from a variety of backgrounds and there was much diversity in life experience within the group. One analytic strategy would be to account for the range of backgrounds and experiences. For two reasons, I chose to focus instead on common pattern and common experience within the group. In the first place, the lived experiences that the women reported were specific, personal, and close-up. A description of range of either experience or background would compromise anonymity and confidentiality. Second, the research question motivated generalization of the stories. Thus, I present a composite response. When I describe background, experience, and feelings, I describe patterns that all members of the group would recognize as predominant themes in the circles, whether or not each individual experienced it.

The question arises as to whether or not, in generalizing, I unknowingly selected themes and descriptions that fit the preconceptions that I had when I framed the research question. I went over the entire body of transcripts in detail several times with that specific question in mind. In other words, I tried to find alternative interpretations, and themes that were as clear and predominant as those I have discussed here.

From the outside, looking in, there is a complex variety of North American Aboriginal identities, based on legal, social, "racial," cultural, ethnic, historical or personal definitions. For this study, I looked to self identification as the criterion. Coincidentally, all the participants meet another criterion that has been loosely applied: each one is recognized by some larger and unquestionably "authentic" Aboriginal community as being part of that community.

The women told a collective story that seems to have its counterparts all through the academic and personal narrative literature. This common theme is pervasive in the literature: people who come to a post-secondary campus to study, who self-identify as Aboriginal, commonly face an unexpected situation: in some way or another, the experience of being physically on a campus and engaged in a program of study means, for most of us, that we have to deal in some way with who we are, and what it means to be an Aboriginal person. I cannot say that non-Aboriginal people do not inevitably come to questions about identity, when they are studying on campus, but they of course do not have to deal with who they are relative to a specific Aboriginal community—not an abstraction, but real people—and a real cultural tradition. It seems as though a common experience of Aboriginal post-secondary students from a wide variety of backgrounds is to face the question of identity. It is remarkable that in this study and in the literature, there is a common theme of some kind of redefinition or reaffirmation.

In this study, that common story is told in the analytic chapters. Chapter Five, 'Now That I'm Here', discussed the themes of *Being in Awe*, *Being Disillusioned*, *Being Confused* and *Being Alone*. These four themes described the women's initial experience and perceptions of the university. This was followed by a discussion of the themes in Chapter Six 'This Is About Me' that emerged after the initial period of time on campus: *Learning the Truth*, *Feeling the Pain*, *Being Angry* and *Finding Support*. Finally, Chapter Seven 'Finding My Place' presents the themes of *Finding Understanding*, *Finding Voice*,

Finding Self and *Finding Wholeness* to describe the final phase of the University experience. Each interpretive chapter, in other words, describes a phase in a chronological time sequence. The ordering of themes served a useful purpose. It provided a framework for the interpretive discussion. It does not presume, however, that there is a direct correlation between chronological and experiential time. Lived experience, said another way, is like a complex web. Each theme may be experienced more than once and not necessarily in linear sequences. For example, 'being angry' and 'finding support' can show up at any time and be returned to several times over the course of being a university student.

The first section of this final chapter integrates a summary of my findings with the literature discussed in chapter two. The discussion begins with the question of identity, including the topic of living-in-two-worlds and is followed by a more elaborate discussion of the ways that my findings correspond to Anderson's four-step theory of Aboriginal women and identity formation and Garrod and Larimore's collection of essays by Dartmouth University Graduates. Finally, this section relates my findings to the earlier discussion on Aboriginal worldview.

The second section of this last chapter 'The Question of Method', presents a review of the talking circle process as shared by the eight Aboriginal women participants in this study and ends with a third section outlining a series of recommendations that emerged from the research.

Conflict Frameworks

There is a common theme in the literature about individual identity and how differences between the groups create conflict in the individual. That is seen to be especially true when the relationships between groups are unequal, where one group is stigmatized by the other, where one group is relatively powerless, or where one group has a separate legal status, as in the case of colonialism. In that explanatory framework, people in the less powerful group can be characterized, or can come to see themselves, as victims. This framework is one in which it has become common to use the term "voice," to say that "voice" has been denied to the individual on the basis of identity within the less powerful group. That framework predicts that people in the less powerful group will incorporate negative aspects of group relations into their individual identities, and that

this creates a situation that requires intervention, or "healing." Three examples, among many, of writing around that theme are provided by Anderson (2000), Graveline (1998), and McCormick (1995). They did not originate the framework but they are examples of how the framework has provided a kind of vocabulary for describing identity formation. The vocabulary is so familiar that we all recognize it. Moreover, it is a vocabulary that many of the women in this study used themselves.

Stan Wilson (pers. comm.) has pointed out that such social-psychological frameworks are based on an assumption of linear, hierarchical, and adversarial processes, and are therefore clearly based in a Western cosmology. Insofar as the Indigenous perspective is relational, the processes through which people come to a realization of who they are would be described in relational terms.

That observation has implications for how to interpret the stories that the women in this study shared in the talking circles. I want to honour the women and what they said, and the best way I know to do that is to try to account for both the common patterns and the differences they discovered in each other's lives. As they describe who they are and how they have become who they are, some of them use the "vocabulary" of the "conflict" framework, the "healing" framework, and the "empowerment" framework.

I must face an important question when I generalize and summarize this project, because I must be explicit about my own background, and my bases for judgement, so that readers can analyze for themselves whether or not I adopt a "Western" or "indigenous" perspective. I will not substantiate the question in the project itself but use the tools that are available to me from all my background.

A very good example of the complexity of this issue is the use of the term "healing" by the women, and my use of it in analysis. The women spoke frequently about "healing" as a process. They spoke about events during their days at university that contributed to healing or pointed out the need for healing. They spoke of people who influenced healing as a process, or whose interactions and connections were in themselves "healing."

One way of looking at that vocabulary is to understand "healing" as an intervention in a state that is out of harmony-where "healing" is an unusual process that is directed to something out of order. It may be that some of the women, or even most of

them, saw "healing" that way. That would be a good research question, but it is not the research question of this project. I wish I had thought to ask that question in the circles or, even better, I wish it had been raised by the women themselves. Instead, I must take what they said about healing at face value.

In my analysis, however, when I use the term I can be explicit. My own understanding of "healing" is that it is a process that all living things are continuously involved in. Healing is the dynamic of life and the maintenance of harmony. "Healing" does not imply any pathology.

In the discussion that follows, there is surely evidence of the legacy of Western thought, of models based on conflict and oppositions, and the vocabulary that comes from those models. It is important to acknowledge that legacy, and at the same time to invite readers' to bring their own observations and judgements about the epistemological bases for the discussion.

The Question of Identity

Stages, Themes, and Process

Prior to attending and completing a degree at the University of Alberta, most of the women in this study did not have a well-defined and positive self-concept about being Aboriginal women. Even though some of them were not ashamed of their Aboriginal heritage, they would likely agree that they were insecure about it. And although the women may not have consciously come to university for the purpose of finding out who they were as Aboriginal people, my findings reveal that they in fact gained exactly that from the experience. Therefore, all of the findings presented in the thematic analysis relate to identity in some way.

The two empirical studies by Archibald et al. (1995) and Young (1996) reviewed earlier, focus in a general way on identity, as one among many factors or barriers to success, and collaborate my findings regarding the importance of identity as a factor affecting successful completion of university studies. Anderson (2000) and Garrod and Larimore (1997) speak more specifically to the issue of identity.

Now That I'm Here

In the chapter, 'Now That I'm Here', the theme *Being in awe* implied that at some level, whether consciously or not, participants considered themselves to be inferior within the hierarchical structure of the university. It could be argued that this represents an internalized belief in the existence of a hierarchy based on race, where Caucasian people are good enough or smart enough to attend and be successful at university but they, as Native people, were not. Consequently, the Aboriginal women arrived at university with fear about their ability to succeed and even questioned whether they should be there at all. They also arrived with excitement and high expectations of this 'place' that held the skills and knowledge that they believed were needed for a better life.

My findings revealed that these initial high expectations changed. The women realized that the university was not an ideal, humanistic, or grand place at the top of some imaginary 'hierarchy'. Ignorant and racist behaviours were encountered at university from professors, from support staff, and from fellow students.

Being disillusioned describes the first signs of reorientation, of movement away from stereotypes about mainstream institutions, and by implication, stereotypical notions about their own identity. This experience of disillusionment is addressed in the literature with regard to the high expectations of Aboriginal students. Several authors describe the disillusionment that arises with a university experience that does not enhance a holistic way of learning and instead focuses primarily on the intellectual (Akan, 1992; Barrette, 1995; Fox, 1996; Wyrostock, 1997). Although there is no evidence in my findings that the women in this research anticipated finding a holistic perspective when they entered university, there is evidence that they were not getting what they expected. Although they did not articulate the desire for a holistic learning experience, the fact that they did not receive one may, at least in part, have contributed to their *being disillusioned* with the university. The theme of *finding wholeness*, at the end of the experience, implies that holistic learning may have been an unconscious need and desire. Once they were exposed to teachings by Elders, ceremonies and other cultural events that helped them to enhance their spiritual and emotional awareness and learning, they realized that cultural awareness was also an important part of their education and university experience.

The women questioned their initial perceptions of the university; *being disillusioned* unsettled their sense of self and opened the way to explore their identity. For some, the experience of *being confused* was exacerbated by past experiences of rejection by other Aboriginal people. Not feeling 'Indian enough' was a common experience for most of the women and it left them asking questions: Is the colour of my skin too light? If I never went to residential school, does that make me less 'Native'? Maybe Native people will never accept me because I don't speak the language? The sense of being apart from the Aboriginal community and from the university environment showed itself in the theme *being alone*. The women, in varying degrees, experienced belonging nowhere. *Being alone* combined with *being confused* and *being disillusioned* is unsettling. I suggest that this complex experience of alienation was a preliminary step to dismantling their feelings of insecurity, and in some cases, their negative identity, and that that complex web of feelings was a necessary precursor to a conscious search for identity.

This is About Me

The chapter 'This Is About Me' reveals a growing awareness that the university experience is now a personal exploration, related to a discovery of their heritage and/or identity as Aboriginal women. Prior to *learning the truth*, participants were not aware of the ways their Aboriginal heritage was important and the extent to which they would want to know or be compelled to learn more about themselves and their families. Learning about their history, colonization, and residential schools, among other things, resulted in changed perceptions of themselves, their families and Aboriginal people in general.

Sometimes, *learning the truth* exposed them to very personal information and made the connection between the problems they saw in their own lives and in the lives of their communities. For example some found a relationship between their parents' shame about or denial of their Aboriginal heritage, being victims of residential school and the colonization process. Uncovering aspects of the past holds deep personal meaning for many Aboriginal people and this truth brought emotions to the surface.

Feeling the pain and *being angry* were themes that describe these emotions: emotions that are understood in this study as belonging to a transitional stage between a

negative or ill-defined identity, not knowing who they were as Aboriginal persons, and a positive identity, of knowing who they are as Aboriginal women. These themes mark the beginning of a conscious awareness of the need to understand their Aboriginal identity: a need that was revealed in situations that caused discomfort such as when called-on in class to speak on Aboriginal issues. The women began to ask themselves questions: 'Why am I being asked? Why don't I know the answers? Why does my heart race when I'm asked a question? Why do these professors put me on the spot? These and other questions, precipitated in this instance, by being called on to be the 'Indian Expert', propelled the women into a personal exploration of their past experiences and perceptions of themselves, their families, and their place in the world.

At this point, my findings are consistent with literature describing the feelings that arise when students find themselves the subjects or objects of study in the classroom. Students struggle to maintain balance in the classroom where Aboriginal people are the objects or artifacts of discussion and written texts (Edge, 2001). The themes *feeling the pain* and *being angry*, in particular, describe the internal conflict that Aboriginal students face in a university environment where racism persists in the form of ignorance; ignorance about the historical reasons for the socio-political and economic issues that plague many present-day Aboriginal communities. The lived reality in our families and communities is far removed from the academic discourse about Indigenous peoples. 'Humiliation', 'alienation', and 'rage' are words used by authors and Aboriginal scholars who have described the experiences of Aboriginal students in universities (Akan, 1992; TeHennepe, 1993; Hampton, 1995a; Monture-Angus, 1996).

Confusion, pain, and anger urged participants to learn about their own peoples historic and current situations, and to find support in that process. *Finding support* describes those aspects that allowed the women the opportunity to resolve the confusion, the pain and the anger and to continue with the work of completing their degrees.

Support came in different forms, and from various sources. For example, some individual professors were sensitive to the difficulties Aboriginal women were facing and offered personal and academic support. For many, support came from the Aboriginal community including 'places' such as Native Student Services (NSS) and the Aboriginal Student Council (ASC) lounge where they went for 'refuge' from the ignorance and

where they could feel supported by fellow Aboriginal staff and students who had or were experiencing similar struggles.

Henderson, as cited in Edge (2001), for example, would anticipate the finding that students rely heavily on the Aboriginal community on campus to offer a safe place where they can express themselves freely and where they can see themselves reflected in the environment: "For most Aboriginal students, the realization of their invisibility is similar to looking into a still lake and not seeing their images. They become alien in their own eyes, unable to recognize themselves in the reflections and shadows of the world" (p.11). He and others affirm that the need for people to see themselves reflected in the world around them is essential to balance and well being (Hampton, 1995b; McCormick, 1995; Wood, 1996).

The women said that they found cultural activities and ceremonies to be a valuable source of support. They attended talking circles where Elders shared their wisdom. They attended pow wows, cultural retreats, and various ceremonies such as sweat lodges and pipe ceremonies. For many, exposure to traditional cultural ways was an experience that provided internal strength, confidence, pride and a sense of belonging in a way that they had not experienced before. Without finding support from what participants refer to as 'the Aboriginal community', many believed that they would not have succeeded. Smith (1999) confirms that exposure to cultural events on campus is an important aspect of the university experience in terms of reinforcing a positive identity. Aboriginal graduates in this study referred to the 'healing' that took place for themselves and within the larger Aboriginal community on campus in the course of completing a university degree. Duran and Duran (1995) refer to the notion of 'collective soul wound' as the need to go beyond a focus on individual problems to the greater need to "restore harmony to the whole community" (p.196).

Finding My Place

The chapter 'Finding My Place', explores the outcomes of the university experience and relates to the idea of 'finding'. The themes *finding understanding, finding voice, finding self* and *finding wholeness* therefore constitute the third and final phase of defining a positive Aboriginal identity. The women no longer felt out of place, guilty or confused about who they were because they saw their communities, their families, and

ultimately themselves in a new way as a direct result of the understanding they gained from learning their history and from meeting other Aboriginal people in a new context. In other words, the knowledge they gained helped them to put their lives into a different perspective. They were able to find understanding and situate the violence, abuse and dysfunction that may have been a part of their past.

Finding voice, the ability and confidence to speak from their own perspective, developed alongside academic success. They realized that neither literature, nor professors could speak for them. Once they understood their past and learned to think critically about what they learned, they were no longer without ways to express themselves in response to ignorance. Knowledge and support gave them the tools they needed and university provided the opportunity to find and use their voices. *Finding voice* is a symbol of empowerment that is inherent in the healing process that many women spoke about at university. Graveline (1998), in particular, claims 'voice' is essential to anyone who has been 'chronically silenced' as a result of colonization:

> Through voice we speak/write our acts of resistance, the healing and empowering values of our Traditions and the role of the European colonizers in the destruction of our communities. Through voice we are gaining our own sense of conscious reality and providing another lens through which Euro-centric educators may view themselves. (p.41)

Finding self was perhaps the most penetrating 'finding' in the women's experience of university. They elaborated on the personal aspects of the journey that contributed to a deeply felt sense of who they were. They clearly grew to appreciate their families, culture and heritage in a new way and although they valued the academic knowledge and skills they acquired, they said that it was the personal discoveries that were the true gifts of attending university. They reconciled confusion about their identity and accepted that sometimes pain and anger were necessary to that reconciliation. Whereas, some of the women may have been reluctant, in the beginning, to openly admit they were Aboriginal, in the end, as one of those women said, "you could stamp it on [her] back" (#4B).

Many of the women described the notion of 'healing' and the belief that the university experience provided the means for *finding wholeness.* They found personal wholeness in terms of the impact that university had on them intellectually, emotionally,

spiritually and physically. As was naturally expected, they expanded their knowledge and intellectual horizons, and they exercised their minds, but the experience also added an intense emotional aspect to their learning. This emotional content included pain, anger as well as joy and excitement. The spiritual component of their experience was also important and was often cited as being critical to their overall wellness. My findings affirm Hanohano's (2000) conclusion that a spiritual connection is imperative to 'good education':

> Spirituality is the fundamental principle that Natives have been searching for in their university experience. It is the search from within that will help give Aboriginal and [all] students the harmony and balance that is needed to meet the demands and rigors of university study and lead them to discover their true selves. (p.211)

The women credit the university experience for bringing them in touch with Elders, ceremonies and cultural knowledge which in turn made them proud and confident as Aboriginal people, and in particular, as Aboriginal women. These experiences, combined with other sources of support, allowed some of the women to overcome problems with addictions and unhealthy lifestyles. From this point of view, those women were grateful for their university experience and credited it with 'saving their lives'.

The concept of wholeness was presented in the dimension of past, present and future. Discoveries about the past allowed them to make an important connection between themselves and their ancestors. Participating in cultural activities and ceremonies helped them to honour their Aboriginal ancestors. Many expressed a sense of great responsibility to their ancestors for preserving the sacredness of the old ways so that they may continue to be available for future generations. Women pointed out that the newly revealed connections to their past played an important role in the successful completion of their degrees and allowed them to affect the future of Aboriginal people.

Finding wholeness also relates to identity in terms of the inter-relationship and responsibility that we have to our 'selves' and to our families and communities. The women spoke at length about how their identities changed while at university from their initial feelings of confusion and lack of awareness to knowledge of, and pride in, their Aboriginal heritage. Foley (1997) sees this process of discovery as "healing the damage from the holocaust that has occurred throughout the past five hundred years" (p.148).

Their newly acquired confidence and pride in themselves intensified and strengthened their commitment to share and 'give back' what they had learned to their families and communities. One woman described finding family in the 'traditional brother' who helped her while she was struggling to belong. Others spoke about the people they met in terms of being 'spiritual family members'. Finding community was an important aspect of the journey through university and the experience created a strong desire/need to give back to their Aboriginal communities in ways that would make life better tomorrow for their children and grandchildren yet unborn.

In summary, the findings of this study speak directly to the research question about identity. The first set of themes represents the first phase in their identity development where their sense of self, prior to and upon arrival at university, was characterized, in some cases, as a negative identity, and in other cases, as lacking pride in or knowledge of what being Aboriginal meant. The section, *Being In Awe* represents a low sense of self in relation to their beliefs and expectations of university. *Being Disillusioned* represents a loss of belief or faith in the perception of inherent superiority of the 'other' – the university. The state of *Being Confused* about who they are precedes the conscious search for answers regarding where they belong and may include the feeling of isolation or *Being Alone*. If we do not know who we are or where we belong, we are left feeling like we are nobody and fit nowhere.

Searching for, and *learning the truth* regarding the history of Aboriginal people, led them beyond the confusion and isolation. However, this new knowledge generated anger and pain which disrupted the way they viewed themselves in terms of being Aboriginal and the way they viewed others—in particular people whom they identified as descendants of the colonizers or 'white people' in general. For example, many did not know what to do with the anger, especially if they had not yet found support at the university. In some cases, the pain and anger was precisely what prompted them to seek out other Aboriginal people or a safe place to discuss their anger. This second set of themes represents the transitional phase of their identity development as they move away from the negative identity or the absence of a positive Aboriginal identity.

The final set of themes describes their identity as it begins to take on elements of a positive self-concept and resolution of who they are and where they belong. They find

awareness, understanding, voice, and wholeness. In the end, they self-define as proud Aboriginal women and as university graduates. In this way they have bridged the two worlds because they have now acquired a strong Aboriginal identity.

Living-In-Two-Worlds

The concept of living-in-two-worlds arose frequently in the literature and the aspect that is of particular relevance to the findings of this study, is the notion that some Aboriginal students fear they must sacrifice their primary, or Aboriginal, identity in order to be successful in a predominantly Western environment. Living-in-two-worlds speaks of the conflict between the two worldviews whose values are at times contradictory: individual versus group identification, competition versus cooperation, and linear versus holistic models of learning.

In this study, anger and pain were deeply felt emotions at some stage of the university experience. In particular, those who were taking Native Studies courses, could no longer separate what they were learning from who they were. Learning about the history and culture of Aboriginal peoples was not a distant or separate process: it was an exploration that changed how they viewed themselves, their families and their communities. For many, the anger became so intense that it was difficult to refrain from hating or lashing out at all 'white' people for having opinions and attitudes that were evidently misinformed by negative stereotypes: the same stereotypical images that sometimes shaped their own earlier definitions of self.

Aboriginal students in post-secondary institutions are often faced with theory that does not coincide with their 'lived experience' of being . TeHennepe (1993) described the issues of First Nations students at the University of British Columbia, trying to relate anthropological theory to their own experience, as one of conflict, with deeper implications about the politics of knowledge: "to acknowledge the difference between theory and lived experience is at the heart of some of the conflicts regarding authority and control of knowledge/information" (p.199). Some of the frustration expressed by the women in this study is resonant with that of the UBC students.

The anger and pain they experienced were, however, part of the on-going process of gaining a stronger sense of 'self', and therefore, served a purpose in the construction of a positive Aboriginal identity. Having to resolve conflict and confusion specific to the

struggle of living in two worlds was not identified as an issue in this study. This may be due in part to the fact that participants did not enter university with a strong primary Aboriginal identity. If they had, it may have placed them in a position of conflict from the start. It was not until after the women acquired a stronger connection to an Aboriginal identity, and a stronger alliance to the Aboriginal community, that conflict of living in two worlds became an issue.

Aboriginal Women and Identity Formation

My findings are generally consistent with Anderson's four-step theory of identity formation. I list them here for review: Resisting negative definitions of being, Reclaiming Aboriginal tradition, Constructing a positive identity by translating tradition into the contemporary context, and Acting on that identity in a way that nourishes the overall well-being of our community (p.15).

Anderson (2000) focused on the ways that Aboriginal women form their identities within Canadian society, whereas this study was concerned with identity within the context of the university experience. Another clear difference from Anderson is that she discusses but does not include a stage that is prior to the resistance stage in her theoretical four-step sequence. In other words, *being in awe, being disillusioned, being confused* and *being alone* do not figure into a step in Anderson's theory of identity formation. Yet there is considerable overlap and a strong relationship between Anderson's theory of identity formation and my findings.

The themes of *being angry* and *being disillusioned* demonstrate the first signs of resistance to negative definitions of being, and therefore, coincide with Anderson's first step. In other words, *being angry* and *feeling the pain* of learning the reality of Aboriginal history provided the impetus to resist the negative classification and stereotyping of Aboriginal people.

My findings are also consistent with Anderson's second step, "reclaiming Aboriginal tradition". *Learning the truth* and *finding understanding* about the history of Aboriginal people invoked the need to renew traditions, values and rituals that previously were not available to them and thereby allowed them to become stronger in their identities as Aboriginal women. *Finding support*, an earlier theme in my discussion emerges as an important aspect of Anderson's second and third step.

Anderson's third step 'constructing a positive identity by translating tradition into the contemporary context' is most closely related to the themes of *finding understanding*, *finding self* and *finding wholeness*. The women in my study found understanding about the past and through that understanding, became secure and confident in who they were.

Anderson's (2000) third step also refers to the ways that new teachings of values, traditions and knowledge are built into the lives of women in a meaningful way. For example, the women in my study joined together with other students to create a community that nurtured a pride in 'being Aboriginal'. Furthermore, many of the women spoke about incorporating prayer into their daily lives and giving thanks for all of life including the difficult experiences. Several found that attending ceremonies was one way of remaining close to the ancestors and their wisdom. Many also referred to teachings they received about their roles as Aboriginal women and the importance of caring for and respecting themselves. In other words, constructing a positive identity meant no longer ignoring their Aboriginal heritage, and instead acting in ways that reinforced, for themselves, their identity as Aboriginal women.

The theme of *finding voice* corresponds to Anderson's fourth step 'Acting on that identity in a way that nourishes the overall well-being of our community'. *Finding voice* describes examples of the ways that the women demonstrated their pride and integrity as Aboriginal women. For example, the women rejected the kinds of ignorance and racism that had previously caused confusion or the desire to hide their Aboriginal identity. In this way, they used their new identity to 'act' towards building a better and more secure future for themselves, their children and their communities.

In short, the findings and themes that emerged in this study are similar to Anderson's four-step theory of identity formation, but the phases identified in this study and the steps described by Anderson are not really interchangeable. The phases of the women's journey through university are compatible only generally in terms of there being a transition from being insecure about their Aboriginal heritage to being proud and confident Aboriginal women. Anderson's "steps" imply a sequence, where one more or less discrete step leads to another. The components of the phases I have identified in this study are not necessarily discrete, nor necessarily sequential.

University Graduate Voices

My findings also integrate well with *First Person, First Peoples: Native American College Graduates tell Their Life Stories* (Garrod & Larimore, 1997). In a manner similar to my study, this collection of work consists of three sections framed within chronological time. Both this work and my research however, identify the significant role that having a positive Aboriginal identity played in the successful completion of university studies. The first theme in Garrod and Larimore's collection of essays, 'When Worlds Collide' describes how students were impacted by their initial introduction to post-secondary education. In contrast to my findings, however, Dartmouth graduates appeared to arrive on campus with a strong sense of self, a positive identification with their Aboriginal identity grounded in tribal traditions and beliefs. Consequently, conflict with "competition", "assertiveness", "self concern" and other Western values appeared sooner and were more pronounced (p.10).

Nevertheless, my findings show confusion about identity rather than a 'confrontation' or 'collision'. Confrontation in my findings did not emerge until the women received information about their history and related issues, and after they experienced ignorance and stereotyping in classrooms. Although occasioned by different situations, Dartmouth graduates, like the women in my study, felt alienated at times and struggled to find a place to belong.

The second theme identified by Garrod and Larimore, was "Planted in the Ground" and directly explored the ways that identity factored into the graduate's experience at college. And although the graduates of Dartmouth did not describe the concept of 'finding' that was so prominent in my study, it was evident that their identities were in fact challenged, shaped and reinforced in similar ways as the University of Alberta graduates.

Dartmouth graduates struggled with the strong emotions such as anger and pain arising from courses containing Aboriginal content. These feelings were directed outwardly in many of the same ways that were described by the participants in my study. For example, they were angry at professors and at primary and secondary schools who did not teach an accurate account of Canadian and American history. They were angry at their families who "were equally silent" about issues such as colonization and residential

schools (Garrod & Larimore, 1997, p.13). But most particularly, both groups of graduates expressed a form of 'free floating' anger at 'white' people in general and experienced difficulty in channeling that anger constructively.

Consistent with my findings, Dartmouth graduates were faced with the same expectation of speaking up in classes where they perceived ignorance and intolerance was present. This placed them in a position of conflict and of having to educate non-Aboriginal people around them about the reality of their community and culture that singled them out from other students. At the same time, many realized that their lack of knowledge about their cultures left them unable to adequately articulate their Aboriginal perspective when it came under academic scrutiny. They had never had to articulate that knowledge to someone who did not understand it.

As with many of the women in my study, graduates at Dartmouth acknowledged the Aboriginal community on campus as being vital to their success at university and revitalization of their Aboriginal identity. A difference that was apparent arose from the fact that Dartmouth graduates were more likely to be far away from their homes, and they therefore relied on the Aboriginal community on campus to fill the role of family to a larger extent.

Both groups of graduates expressed fear and doubt with respect to acceptance by their own people. Many of the women in my study and the Dartmouth graduates, in other words, had experienced negative judgements within the Aboriginal community and found themselves holding negative images about Native people. The extent to which Western stereotypical images of Aboriginal people shaped their attitudes towards themselves and the attitudes of other Aboriginal people was acknowledged. Garrod and Larimore (1997) refer to this situation as "internalized oppression" in that Native people impose the same judgmental, sometimes exclusionary behaviours towards other Native people that were inflicted on them. And, at least in the situation that involved a woman in my study overhearing another Aboriginal student questioning her integrity, this form of oppression or rejection "experienced at the hands of other Native people [was]...most devastating... [and] destructive" (p.15).

The third theme in *First Person, First Peoples*, "Coming Full Circle" is based on the expressed wish of Dartmouth graduates to use their education in ways that

contributed to the improvement of their communities. "Coming full circle" relates to findings in my study where *Finding Self* and *Finding Wholeness* describe how the women came to understand who they were and where they fit within their families, communities and the universe. Being Aboriginal and wishing to work with Aboriginal people was expressed and although my study did not address the women's experiences beyond university, I am aware that they are either currently working within the Aboriginal community, or pursuing higher degrees for that purpose.

In both these studies, students did not withdraw from university or college when the going got tough. Each of these groups chose to accept their education as a means to "gather and sharpen the tools [that would] ensure... cultural survival" (p.17). In the end, post secondary education was very much a personal journey of redefining, rediscovering or re-confirming their identity as Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal Worldview

The discussion of worldview in the literature addressed the question of identity in a central way and emerged as equally central in the findings of this study, namely, as *finding wholeness*. To reiterate, the participants' identity was comprised of physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual unity as well as being inseparable from their history and community. Holistic interconnectedness, spirituality and community are essential aspects of identity and education.

This brings me to the argument that interconnectedness is sometimes experienced unconsciously or as 'cell memory' (Lionel Kinunwa). My mother refers to this concept of unconscious motivation as 'blood memory'. Although my findings don't speak directly to a conscious awareness of cell memory, or driving force behind the desire to know more about Aboriginal people, I suggest that at least at an unconscious level, this 'memory' of who we are and what is important in life remains. Being aware and articulating who we are is a conscious process. How we behave and act in the world, however, is a combination of conscious and unconscious processes.

Although the women in my study did not necessarily articulate the reasons why they were drawn to Aboriginal ways, they did express great joy and relief at being drawn into traditional ceremonies and teachings. Embedded in their 'cell memory' was an unconscious need for connection to themselves as being Aboriginal. Cell memory

explains why I feel the urge to cry when I dance in the center of an inter-tribal pow wow song. It is truly a mesmerizing experience to 'feel' the power of the singers, the bells and the jingles of hundred of dancers around me and to feel my feet upon the earth at the same time. It feels like I'm being lifted or embraced by something very powerful. Although it makes me want to cry for reasons I cannot articulate fully, I know that the elation relates to my being connected physically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually within my self, to other Aboriginal people, and to the Creator. In the same way, I am drawn to the sound of the Ojibway language of my ancestors despite the fact that I don't understand more than a few words. Hearing the language connects me to the spirit of my ancestors in the same way that ceremony does. This spiritual connection is critical to the way I think, feel, act and live my life. Central to my identity, and the identity of the women in the study, is this spiritual essence interconnected to all that we are.

The role of spirituality in the university experience was an important theme in the literature. The literature lends credibility to this finding in my study: several of the women were exposed, while at university, to cultural teachings and ceremonies for the first time in their lives. In fact, when asked what they valued most about their university degrees, they elaborated far more on the non-academic aspects of their learning than on the knowledge they received from textbooks or from the classes. The way that graduates describe their spiritual experiences while attending university confirm what Akan (1992), Hampton (1995b) and Hanohano (2000) believe concerning the importance of spirituality being closely linked to education, and the need to incorporate all parts of the self into the post-secondary experience.

The findings of my study concur with Anderson's (2000) claim that a "strong family, a sense of community and a close relationship with the land" provides the strength to withstand or "defy the many oppressive experiences that an Aboriginal woman is likely to encounter" (p.116). This is consistent with the description of Aboriginal worldview where interconnectedness, spirituality and community are foundational to Aboriginal identity and the Aboriginal way of life.

The Question of Method

This research was a qualitative study that employed a traditional form of communication within Aboriginal culture, called talking circles in order to answer the question of Aboriginal women's experience at university. This method includes the Aboriginal worldview aspects of interconnectedness, spirituality and community, and ensures the principles of equality, caring, honesty and respect. I chose the talking circle as a research method because it met my criteria of being a culturally sensitive and ethically sound data gathering method.

I used talking circles in two ways during this research process. First, I invited nine people who work in the field of post-secondary education to sit in circle with me as a way of receiving assistance and guidance in the use of talking circles as a research method. I called this first set of circles 'Guidance Circles'. Second, I used talking circles to collect the data from eight Aboriginal women who shared their stories regarding their experiences at university. I called these 'Story Gathering Circles'.

Participant Reflections

Talking circle as a research method deserves special attention, and therefore, each of the final Story Gathering Circles was devoted to this topic in that I asked the women to reflect on the research process itself. I categorized their feedback in two ways. First, in terms of the effectiveness of talking circle as a data gathering tool, and second, in terms of its personal significance to them as participants.

Talking Circle as Method

Talking circles are oral, spiritual and based on relationships within a community. The participants expressed support for talking circles as an appropriate method for discovering the truth of women's experience at university. In fact, several women admitted that the 'method' was what attracted them to participate in the research. As one woman said, "I remember thinking when you asked me to participate, how awesome it would be to use talking circle as the method and how exciting is would be to be a part of your research" (#5B). Another woman expressed her support this way:

> I strongly believe in supporting the circle as a method. It's a paradigm shift in a way to think of something sacred as being a method. It makes me think that university doesn't have to kill souls: it can be supportive of spirituality or of the

sacredness of the circle. It strengthens us and the indigenous worldview to have a place here in academia. (#4A)

According to participants' feedback, using talking circle as a method was also conducive to the collection of reliable and deeply felt, personal information. Several of the women commented that honesty comes naturally or automatically from "holding the grandfather eagle feather' because it "acts as a truth serum" (#5B). They added that it was the inclusion of ceremony in the process that played a big part in bringing honesty "because to not tell the truth would be betraying the grandfathers" (#5B). Talking circles also allowed for a depth of sharing. As several participants stated, talking done in circles is "from the heart" (#4A):

> I see interviews as of the head and very academic. When I get asked a question, I'm thinking about how I can say something and what are the angles? When I'm here, I try to do that but I speak from my heart and I trust that you're going to get what you need with everybody giving you their hearts. I like to think that this is the gift that each person in the circle gives. (#4A)
>
> With circle you're going to get heart and you've got heart here... everybody's heart. (#4A)

The women insisted that I would not have received the same information from a questionnaire, or an individual interview because what we shared was created and developed in relationship both to the individuals and to the circle as a whole. They said that individual interviews tend to be less personal and less likely to allow for personal exploration of a topic:

> Interviews would have gotten more clinical kinds of answers -- yes, no, maybe. It would have been more sterile. (#5A)
>
> I wouldn't have opened up as much, nor would I have remembered as much because the other women's stories triggered my own recollections. (#5A)
>
> What I shared was not the result of your direction but what I really felt and thought was important. I think when you have a one-on-one interview, the direction is often given by the interviewer so they will get the answers they want. This process has allowed me to decide what is important for me to share. (#4A)
>
> The circle helps you get the real answers. When I sit down in front of a questionnaire, I don't always give honest answers. (#4A)
>
> There was no effort at all involved in [this process] and I think that a one-on-one interview would have been way more effort than a circle. You could've sat down and asked us 200 question each but I think here, it was an experience and the experience I think really helped each one of us. (#4A)

> In an interview situation, it would've felt like more like a duty or something. This was enjoyable. (#4A)
>
> The circle was different for me. In an interview, I would have felt more reserved. I probably wouldn't have said as much as I did. (#4A)

Using talking circles as a research method allows Aboriginal researchers to use a tradition within their culture: "Bringing this forward as a valid research method is saying to other Aboriginal researchers, that within our cultures we are reclaiming our traditions of research. [It is] part of our recovery from colonization" (GC#3). And a second person said it this way: "We aren't coming at this new. We are recovering what we have had to put under the ground and we're bringing it back" (GC#3).

The women also expressed a fear of those, when holding talking circles up to academic scrutiny, may thereby tear it apart or judge it according to standards which are inappropriate. Smith (1999) agrees that "the ability of academic colleagues to assess, on an informed basis, what might count as appropriate and worthwhile in the indigenous arena, is questionable" and therefore, we must be prepared to defend our actions because "in most institutions, support for indigenous issues is not overt" (p.131).

Sharing our knowledge and traditions is a position that we, as Aboriginal people, contemplate and understand, but we also struggle with it. There is potential for appropriation of this traditional model by people who do not understand or value the depth of meaning necessary to its application. Cultural appropriation takes place when elements of our traditional ways are used for personal or commercial gain, or are used in ways that disrespect their original intent or meaning.

A talking circle requires good intention, purity of heart and clarity of mind (Graveline, 1998). It is not something to be taken lightly. People without the proper teachings may corrupt a sacred ceremony: "Circle work does have its complexities, in spite of the appearance of simplicity. ... While the physical form of circle work may be easily comprehended, the spiritual and other dimensions are not" (Graveline, 1998, p.244).

In thinking about who should use the talking circle for research purposes, several women, including the Cultural Advisor who participated in the Guidance Circle, expressed concern:

> You've got to be really careful about cultural appropriation. It's like giving a loaded gun to someone so you've got to know how to handle it. There's got to be some sort of controls because if you just say okay this is how you do a circle and these are all the elements that need to be present, this is how you do the smudge, this is how you call on the ancestors, this is the setting, then you could get somebody who doesn't care about the sacredness of the ceremony and they may be just into power, control and ego and they can misuse those things. So that must be protected. (CA)
>
> When you talk about circle as method, it scares me a bit. It's how some of our drumming has been taken and our medicines and our pipes have been used in disrespectful manners. I get a little defensive. (#4A)
>
> In the wrong hands, the circle wouldn't be very productive and a lot of negativity might come up. Therefore it must remain in the hands of Elders or people who are knowledgeable about it. (#5B)
>
> We helped each other share our stories and so I think as a method, it's useful. I'd be cautious about who used it though. (#4A)
>
> Non Native people shouldn't use it if they do not have the appropriate guidance from an Elder or someone who is knowledgeable and knows how to use the medicines and knows the appropriate protocol. (#5B)

In spite of the concern expressed by some women about cultural appropriation and disrespectful adaptation of talking circles for research, there was also the alternative view shared. "I believe that our traditions need to be taught to others in order to assist in healing the earth" (Graveline, 1998, p. 242.). The Cultural Advisor for my research expressed this viewpoint:

> Maybe it's time that we quit trying to control that which is sacred to us. Maybe it's time that we in our generation allow that spirit to be birthed. I think that's what we have to do is we have to challenge ourselves more and be secure enough in our identity and our own truth to go forward and share our knowledge. (CA)

Although there is a willingness to share our ways with the dominant society, we "do not want them to exploit it, do damage to it, or make fun of it" (Graveline, 1998, p.246).

There was general consensus from the women that this was not a method to be used by people unfamiliar with the cultural protocols, values or principles underlying the sacredness of the circle or the teachings that accompany the eagle feather, talking stick or grandfather rock. This knowledge is integral to the appropriate use of circle as method. In particular, the women stated that it should not to be used by Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal people who have not received the teachings or earned the right to conduct talking circles

on their own. Researchers who are willing to 'do the work' necessary to learn the many layers of meaning, may however, gain the knowledge and respect necessary to be granted permission to implement this tool themselves:

> If we are going to honour spiritual interconnectedness, a central teaching of circle work, care must be taken to do more than place ourselves in a circle formation. We must invite the ancestors and the other powers of life into our learning spaces....Guidance of or consultation with our traditionalists is essential prior to undertaking any circle. (Graveline, p.132)

It was for this reason that I sought the support of a cultural resource person to advise me and elicited guidance from a group of community members rather than undertake this work on my own. I urge others who are interested in this research method to do the same.

Talking circles evoke deep memories, because members are in a safe place to allow feelings to emerge:

> We use circle for deepening, deepening to the bone the process of healing, like an onion skin, as you deepen in an Aboriginal circle, what you get is a peeling away, peeling away, and peeling away, so that we're all finally in circle together, towards the end, we all have cleared out everything and we're just be there in our spiritual sense, or in our most closest to our heart sense. (Graveline, p.240)

Responding to the various situations and emotions that may arise in circle requires skill and knowledge. For example, old wounds can be 'opened' as was the case with one woman who began talking about the importance of being able to trust the people she shares with, but she soon found herself crying about a painful memory from adolescence when she felt deeply betrayed. We all understood and encouraged her need to cry and, in the end, I think she was comforted by the support she received: "I know the power of the circle – miracles can happen but we become very vulnerable when we open our hearts" (#4A). It would be irresponsible for a researcher to leave participants to resolve, on their own, some of the wounds that may have opened up as a result of the circle process. I was very conscious of people's feelings as they revisited old memories and issues. One woman said it this way: "I believe there is a huge honour to sit in a circle, but it's also married with a huge responsibility" (#5B).

Talking Circle as Gift

Smith (1999) explains the true beauty of sharing is that: "it gives dignity to the giver. To accept a gift and to reciprocate gives dignity to the receiver" (p.105). I believe

that in this way, the Story Gathering Circles became a gift in themselves. Elders say that all circles are healing, regardless of their intended purpose. I believe this to be true. Participants referred to the circle process as a gift in that they felt honoured by the mutual trust that was felt, and the respect that was shown to them. In the end, they felt validated to know many of their own positive and negative experiences were shared by others.

In the beginning, the Story Gathering Circles offered each of the women safety. With the help of prayer, ceremony and the sacred medicine, circles created an environment where the women were safe to speak about the personal events of their lives. They offered these words:

> The whole ceremony part of this with the smudge and the prayer made me feel safe. (#4A)
>
> It's a natural process. It makes sense to my spirit because it doesn't threaten me and it doesn't make me feel like I'm being told what to say. It really feels natural. (#2B)
>
> I really appreciated hearing what the other women had to say. I really saw similarities among us. We all have different experiences, but I think it's our similarities that helped to bond us and make us feel safe. (#4A)

Participants in the Story Gathering Circles quickly learned to trust each other by listening to others who, like themselves, were exploring their own fears, apprehensions, anger, pain and so forth. We were entrusted with each other's stories that were very personal. For some of them, trusting was not an easy thing to do. I felt inspired by their courage to trust and honoured to be witness to it:

> It takes a while for me to trust, but when I'm in a circle, I can't help but trust... it just happens. (#4A)
>
> It's the development of the circle and the trust that is established. We know each other well now. I've told you things that I haven't told a lot of people. There's a trust when you share in circle. It develops out of respect for the sacredness of the medicines, the rock, the feather and whatever we may be using. It's a natural progression of developing that trust with the people that we're talking to. (#5B)

Talking circles allowed participants to connect in a spiritual way with each other and for many, the experience was healing. Sinclair (1993) says that all circles are healing regardless of the intended purpose or reasons for coming together. I believe this to be true. Our tears and laughter made the process complete. Graveline (1998) agrees:

"Storytelling is a form of reciprocity in which we each learn and share from each other. This can produce a healing effect" (p.169).

Participants were able to look back at their experience at university and voice their concerns and gratitude for those parts of their journey, that now contribute to who they are. Perhaps for the first time since completing their degrees, women were able to sit quietly and revisit those events that invoked both pain or joy. In this way, the circles allowed these eight women to heal old wounds, celebrate their accomplishments and honour their stories.

> Sometimes I have to remind myself how far I've come and continue to come. (#2B)
>
> I think these circles were great. They reminded me how far I've actually come. I realize that I've done a few things that are petty good. (#4A)
>
> When I walked across that stage to get those two degrees, I knew it was the biggest thing I'd every completed. (#5B)

They were thankful for the opportunity to remember "that every step [they] took at the university was not just a struggle, it was also a gift" (#5B). They were able to have the time to reflect on, and acknowledge their accomplishment in a way that went beyond their short walk across the stage at convocation. They expressed some sadness that the research process had come to an end and the circles stopped. However, they also realized that "the sharing and the gifts received from everybody in the circle is something [they] would never lose" (#5B). In other words, it allowed the women the luxury of time to reflect: "This is me time – it's selfish and wonderful" (#5B). Especially for those who had not previously taken the time to reflect on their experience, it allowed 'closure' to the university experience:

> Since ceasing to be a student, I don't think I allowed myself to grieve the loss of my identity as a university student. It seems to have been such a laborious task to be a student and go through all that I went through, but I miss it. (#5B)
>
> What a gift this circle has been to me for a few reasons. I have had to walk through some very important things in my life as a student and I think it's quite significant for me because being finished now has made me realize how hard I worked. (#5B)
>
> I'm grateful for being in this circle because it's taken me back to a place that I think I let slip away. I was so tired when I graduated and I didn't give myself any time to rest. I didn't give myself time to mark the end of one journey and the start

> of a new one. I should have done that and so, I think it's very fitting to be here. (#2B)

Sitting in circle was sometimes filled with laughter. For example when the women found themselves remembering funny things they'd forgotten: "I went right through little photographs in my head of the [Aboriginal student] lounge and us bursting in there, or walking through HUB [the university residence and mall]. This is great because my head and my heart went right back there" (GC#1).

Talking circles reminded others of people they wished they had acknowledged personally: "When I go back and think about it, I realize how much he [brother] did push me and I've never said that to him. I think he needs to hear how much I appreciated that and so it's good for me coming to these circles because it takes me back to remind me of important things" (#2B).

It was also validating for some of the women to realize that others went through many of the same fears, guilt and confusion as they did: "It reminded me that for each step I took, there were others doing the same thing and I was not alone" (#5B).

The idea of 'giving back' is an important tradition for Aboriginal people and was something that was alluded to by the women. They were able to give a part of themselves to each person in the circle by sharing their time and listening respectfully to each others' stories. It is understood that listening is just as important as speaking in a relationship: "It is the balance of that energy that makes a circle positive or powerful. By attending to others and speaking from your heart, you honour yourself, the speaker, the circle and the spirit of connectedness" (Graveline, 1998, p.140).

They also said they appreciated the opportunity to give back to me as an Aboriginal researcher so that I may achieve my own goals and ultimately help others to follow in my footsteps. And it fulfilled a desire in them to give back or help others that might benefit from reading their stories: "I think I have an obligation to hold my hand to [other Aboriginal students] because somebody helped me along the way and I've got to help others" (#4A).

> An Elder told me once that knowledge is not ours. It's meant to be shared and if something has been given to you, in order to keep what you learn alive, you must pass it on. I really believe that. (#5B)

> University saved my life and if somebody can read this and if we can touch other students and to get through to even one girl who thinks she can't come here, then that will be a lot. (#5B)

In the end, talking circle offered the gift of bonding to each of the participants: "Doing research in the normal sense would not have developed a group identity. Most other qualitative research I've come upon just doesn't offer that" (#5B). Perhaps, as the researcher, I would have bonded with each of the women during the process of individual interviews; however, the women would not have bonded with each other.

> A really nice thing to come out of this was the sense of friendship and sharing and trust. (#5B)
>
> I know that I have learned so much from being in this circle and knowing and sharing with each of you. (#5B)
>
> I've been in circle before and the sharing and the gifts that I took away from everybody in them is something I will never lose. (#5B)
>
> This circle is really a special thing. You're my friends now and I'm really glad that has developed. This circle may be for research purposes but it's also developed a very unique bond between us. (#5B)
>
> I look at how I feel so connected to the women that are in this circle and even to the women I barely knew who stories sound so similar to mine and I think that's the power, the beauty and the humility of the circle. (4A)
>
> I am humbled by the beauty of this way ... to be able to feel, and share and cry with virtual strangers has been a beautiful bonding experience. (#1B)
>
> Every time I'm in a circle, I feel bonded to the others in a special way and I feel strongly bonded to each of you. (#1B)
>
> It has been a pleasure to know everybody and it doesn't end here. Circles don't end. (#4A)
>
> The best part of the circle is getting to know people and getting to share. I think if people used circles more often, the world would be much better off. (#4A)

I believe that the circle took on a life or spirit of its own and allowed a spiritual community to develop among the women. Our prayers invited the grandfathers and grandmothers to come close and hear our words and in this way, we shared something bigger than our selves: "The circle process itself helps build community connections. As a tool for personal healing and transformation, it provides reciprocity to community members who come in to share their stories and experiences" (Graveline, 1998, p.177).

Using this method also allowed for the opportunity to use a tradition that exists within the culture. In this way, we honour not only the other individuals within the circle,

but we also honour our ancestors and the university community by sharing our cultural ways with them. Even though it was not my intent, some researchers at university may see this as an invitation to apply it to their own research without the proper understanding of the underlying meanings attached to various aspects of the talking circle. We must caution against the well intentioned, though misguided, use of this as a research method for everyone, especially people with little or no cultural sensitivity. The deeper meaning of the circle must be fully understood; otherwise there is a danger of corrupting a sacred process. I have maintained that when a Talking Circle is considered for research, the researcher should seek the advice and collaboration of a cultural advisor, a teacher with authority: none of us are truly competent judges of our own cultural sensitivity. Talking circles if used properly and respectfully can become "building blocks of community" (Graveline, 1998, p.141).

Role of the Researcher:

My role as a researcher was to facilitate the gathering of women's stories in order to gain knowledge about the experience of Aboriginal women at the University of Alberta. This role was supported by the talking circle process, in that openness, trust and safety were inherent in this method. In other words, the task of relationship-building in order to secure accurate information from participants was not entirely dependent on my ability to establish trust and build rapport. People entrusted the circle, which included having trust in me and in each other, with information about themselves which was highly personal. I was responsible, however, for initiating the circle and establishing proper protocol. In this regard, participants expressed confidence in the way that I proceeded:

> I think that using the circle for research and the way you've done it has been good. It has created this safe environment to talk. (#4A)
>
> I see you using talking circle in a good way and a really respectful way. I think our culture is dynamic and there's room for us to explore new ways of doing things as long as it is used properly and respectfully. (#4A)

I felt honoured by their trust and acknowledged that responsibility for conducting or facilitating a talking circle was not entirely a new experience for me. I have participated in talking circles over many years and for many purposes including healing, conflict resolution, consensus building and visioning. However, having the sole

responsibility for asking people to sit in circle to serve my own purpose was a new experience. That is, participants were doing me a favour and I knew that their time spent with me was also time taken away from their children, families and other responsibilities. And despite the fact that they spoke eloquently about the gifts that they received as participants and their gratitude for the opportunity to be a part of this study, I was and am still humbled by their generosity in sharing their time.

I felt an enormous sense of responsibility to 'get it right' and although I found myself wanting to share my own story as an equal participant, I also felt it would have been selfish to use the circle time for this reason. At the same time, I was conscious of the possibility of influencing others or contaminating the direction and focus of the Story Gathering Circles.

I share the concerns expressed by the women regarding cultural appropriation, who should use the talking circle for research, and how to address issue of protocol and respect. I do however, wish to add the following thoughts. It is important for the facilitator/researcher to have his/her own support system outside of the research circles in order that he/she does not inadvertently take advantage of the circles for their own purposes, outside of the research focus.

I also recommend that researchers be prepared to accept that circles may seem to wander off topic. Remember that circles take on a life of their own and should not be manipulated or controlled. Although it is important to provide clear guidelines at the start of the overall circle process and to outline or re-state the parameters of the research at the beginning of each circle, it is also crucial that circles be allowed to go in the direction that they need to go.

I realized at the end of the process that it would have been helpful to receive more descriptive examples to illustrate the women's experience. Had I not been so concerned that I might manipulate the circle, or divert its focus or direction, I could have provided participants with more clarity concerning this point. This was a weakness in my study but one that need not be a weakness for others. As it turned out, I was overwhelmed with the volume of data that became over 200 pages of typewritten transcripts. Their stories were rich. Notes I made following each gathering spoke of the depth of feelings they shared and the significance this had for all, including myself.

Rather than finding the task of transcribing the tape recordings to be tedious, I enjoyed listening to their voices. When I lit a smudge, prayed and kept a candle burning, I felt connected to their spirits once again and to the spirit of the Story Gathering Circles. In fact, long after the transcribing was complete, and during times when my momentum waned or when I lost my focus, I would select a tape from its safe place and listen to it again. I found the women's voices and stories not only served to sustain my commitment to this work, they kept the circles alive and the women's spirits present in my writing process. I have thought that I would like to keep the taped transcripts: perhaps forever, so that I may pull them off the shelf when I am lonely or if I need to rejuvenate my own spirit. However, as promised, I will physically release them, knowing that the essence and their meaning, and the spiritual gift they represent will remain with me always.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are directed at those areas where problems exist in post-secondary education. They are presented with the intent to improve the retention rates of Aboriginal students. They are based on the findings of this study, the participants' feedback and my years of experience being a university student and being employed in post-secondary institutions. Recommendations are structured and presented within the following categories: the University of Alberta administration, Professors, the Aboriginal community, and Aboriginal students on campus. Finally, I include recommendations for further study.

Recommendations to People in University Administration

As Smith (1999) points out, on campuses where differences are not valued or respected, the Aboriginal students who already face culture shock face multiple other barriers. Respect for difference cannot be created by policy, but policy can reflect a respectful or disrespectful campus environment.

The women in the study had attended the University of Alberta; while these recommendations are directed to that university community, they have implications for post-secondary institutions generally. Support systems and programs need to be tailored to the values and needs of Aboriginal people, to help students succeed. These women, successful in University terms, found support resources that allowed a strong sense of

pride in their Aboriginal identity to emerge. This is a strong theme: it was the Aboriginal community that provided the most significant source of support. Having a place to go to be with other Aboriginal students, and having the opportunity to meet Elders, Aboriginal scholars and other Aboriginal role models, were critical to obtaining and discovering a positive Aboriginal identity.

1. **Support the construction of an Aboriginal Centre** to house existing and identified services and programs for Aboriginal students, faculty, staff and community at large. It could serve as a symbol of commitment, recognition and respect for the contributions made by the original peoples of Canada and so would likely improve student enrollment and retention, and foster good relationships between the university and Aboriginal communities. It would provide a physical location on campus for the Aboriginal community on campus to do what it does so effectively in terms of support.
2. **Enhance existing programs to include the use of Elders and cultural resource people** so that students have greater opportunity to learn traditional values, ceremonies and teachings.
3. **Aggressively recruit Aboriginal faculty** in an effort to enhance students' identity by allowing them to see them selves reflected in the person at the front of the classroom.
4. **Enforce a zero tolerance policy on racism**. There are many accounts of students feeling isolated in a hostile environment where professors and fellow students express racist attitudes and opinions. Aboriginal students are sometimes silenced by these ignorant or unthinking remarks in the university classrooms and can become emotionally exhausted particularly when they feel too vulnerable to challenge the views expressed.
5. **Be open to alternative worldviews.** There is more than one way of knowing. Accommodation of Aboriginal culture and identity should be regarded as a core responsibility of public institutions. "... we have something to contribute as well -- yes, we want to learn your ways, but we also want to learn and share our ways" (GC#3).

6. **Address ignorance** by presenting a balanced perspective that ensures students freedom to make up their own minds and form their own opinions. The level of ignorance in university is inexcusable but not surprising when considering the bias that is taught in the elementary and secondary levels, when information is even included, and the one-sided images seen in the media. In fact, it is evident that very little is taught in the public school system to accurately educate children about Aboriginal people, history or culture. Universities must recognize the distinct contributions of First Nations in Canada. Educational institutions have a pivotal role in transforming the relationship between Aboriginal people and Canadian society and in my view, they have the greatest potential for reducing the education disparities that exist.
7. **Offer a core course on First Nations Peoples that is mandatory for all students.** This would help to break down the stereotypes that are still rampant in society and correct some of the misconceptions that persist about Aboriginal people. The following comments were offered in this regard, including a strategy to avoid the financial implication. Such a course might go a long way toward educating the future leaders of this country, who, at least in part, are a product of what they learn in university.

> It seems so ironic to me that we call universities the highest place of learning. University is elitist in a way with only 20% of the population who get a degree. But when you realize that many of the people who will lead this country through the next generation -- politicians, lawyers, teachers, social workers etc., and ask what do they know about the First Nations or Indigenous people of this land? (#4B)

> Senior Native Studies students could teach such a course and receive credit. ... The thing that is so ironic and shameful is how they [university administration] justify making all of these thousands of students take all of those different core subjects in order to cover a wide range of knowledge areas, but in there is nothing on Canada's First Nations people. (#4B)

An accurate account of history and the contributions made by the Indigenous peoples in Canada must be reflected, in particular, in the

Bachelor of Education curriculum so that all students can benefit, but in particular, so that Aboriginal students can develop a stronger identity in their primary years.

8. **Enhance retention services and strategies programs** that allow constructive responses to the often-expressed emotions that arise for students learning what colonization meant for our own cultural practices. This is critical so that healing and transformation are the expected outcomes rather than the alternative response of discontinuing studies. Students must have opportunities to give voice to their concerns and emotions so that they can prepare for leadership and mentorship roles within their communities; otherwise students will continue to experience the university environment as one of isolation, conflict and tension.

Recommendations for Professors

Professors and university personnel must become more aware and culturally sensitive to the issues that Aboriginal students face at university.

1. Professors and other instructors should be obliged **to seek assistance from Native Student Services when they see Aboriginal students struggling to complete a course.** They must not assume that the student will come forward him/herself. Demonstrating caring goes a long way in helping Aboriginal students to gain confidence in their ability and to stabilize their personal well-being.
2. **Do not single Aboriginal students out in the classroom**. Accepting the responsibility to speak up happens gradually and the added pressure must not be imposed on Aboriginal students. They may not be ready to speak up nor feel qualified to answer, which can cause embarrassment. As well, Aboriginal students from one nation resent feeling as if they should be the class expert on all topics related to Indigenous peoples.
3. **Allow students to express their anger**. Although this may not be possible to do in class, it is important to validate their right to those feelings. One woman had this advice for those who may find themselves on the receiving end of an Aboriginal person's anger:

> [white people/professors and classmates] don't take it personally. Let us speak. This is about giving voice to us. Hear us and know that when we speak with anger, it is because there is pain that we haven't yet healed from. Listen to the pain that we've gone through and then maybe we won't be so angry and when we have a stronger sense of our culture being preserved and respected and valued, then our anger will go away because we'll feel more secure and trusting. (GC#1)

4. **It is essential that course content provide a balanced perspective**. For example, with regard to residential schools, there are many perspectives: the government has one point of view, the churches have another. And even within the Aboriginal community itself, there are different points of view. Some, (albeit a small number), recall their residential school experience as being positive. Good instructors present all possible perspectives and thereby allow students the freedom of choice.

Recommendations to the Aboriginal Community

Acknowledgement and recognition from our own people is vital to Aboriginal students for many reasons. One woman shared this sentiment: "At convocation, an Elder came up to me afterwards and said in my ear 'I'm so proud of you and I started to cry because it came from my people. Just to hear that was the crowing glory for me that day" (#2A).

1. **Be actively involved in supporting their future leaders**. Community support was critical to one woman in particular, who described feeling so 'privileged and 'honoured' that she had a Band sponsoring her. Although she had never met the Education counsellor from her Nation in person, she grew close to her. This relationship added an important element of responsibility that extended beyond this student's own personal gain. Her sense of responsibility to her home community helped her through some tough times: "After that third year, I wanted to quit...but I remember thinking that I had to finish because ...I owed it to my people" (#5B). Support can be demonstrated in simple ways such as visiting students on their campus once a year, attending campus community functions, sending greetings or calling just to say hello.

2. **First Nations Education Counsellors need to be aware and experienced in what it takes to succeed in university**. Education counsellors at the band level who have university experience themselves understand the demands of university and are able to provide the kind of support students' need for success. My work in post-secondary education has exposed me to many of the First Nations' policies and procedures regarding post-secondary sponsorship. Most sponsored students are required to take a minimum of four, and sometimes five courses per semester. This is sometimes more than first year students or adult students returning to university can realistically manage given their additional family, community and financial responsibilities. On the other hand, many post-secondary counsellors do not know that three courses is a full load for graduate students and that it would be unrealistic and indeed impossible to take five courses. In addition to course work, most post-secondary counsellors do not know that time is required to do field research and to write a thesis. Many Nations fund students only during the period that they are taking courses. All of this information should be part of a training package for those who provide post-secondary counselling to Aboriginal students. Students need the flexibility to take a reduced course load, especially in their first year, to allow them to make the necessary transition and build a strong foundation.
3. **Aboriginal teachers and community members have a responsibility to be role models to Aboriginal students in order to enhance their sense of identity prior to entering university**. Institutions need to be receptive to change if Aboriginal people are to be well served but they [faculty] cannot teach us who we are. We have to teach each other: "It is my belief that to save Indian people, we need to be educated. Because we're going to be our own best advocates to save our cultures" (David Lucero, 1997, p.164).
4. **Be aware of and support the existing programs and services at university**.

Recommendations to Aboriginal Students on Campus

1. **Aboriginal students need to support each other** and **welcome new students to the Aboriginal community on campus** so they find a place to belong. There were many comments made by the women regarding their fear of rejection or judgement by their own people, who may perceive them as being 'not Indian enough'. This carries a strong message that we all need to be more aware of our own attitudes and behaviour so that we do not exclude those student struggling to come to terms with their identity.
2. **Take responsibility for becoming informed about issues so that you can educate those around you.** This is unavoidable for us in university. Our only choice is whether we do it well or not.
3. **Seek assistance to deal with feelings of anger, pain, or confusion as it arises so that it does not affect your ability to do the work you came here to do**. It is important for Aboriginal students who are struggling to resolve overwhelming emotions so that it does not get in the way of learning. One woman explained it this way:

   > When you start learning about Native people in some classes, you get so mad at the world. But in order to succeed, you need to expect and accept that anger and move past it. That's what I learned to do and had to do so that I wasn't walking out on the street and snarling at every white person I walked by. (#4B)

   Quitting school may seem like an immediate solution to relief from emotional difficulties, but one that harms the student further and likely adds to the anger and pain rather than resolving it.
4. **Choose your battles carefully**. One woman spoke about being 'Aboriginal Street Smart' to describe the sense of responsibility we feel in always having to speak up and educate others. She advises Aboriginal students to choose their battles carefully so that they do not become exhausted and side tracked.

Recommendations for Further Study

1. **Research with male Aboriginal graduates.** Posing the same question to a group of Aboriginal men who attended and graduated from the University of Alberta would be an interesting study for a number of reasons. It would allow researchers to see if the impact of the university experience affects Aboriginal men's sense of identity in similar ways. It would also allow researchers to further explore the ways that the effectiveness of talking circles as a research method might vary according to the gender or make-up of participants and thereby affect the findings of a research study.
2. **Research with Aboriginal people who did not complete their degrees** would be valuable to determine the extent to which those Aboriginal students who withdrew prior to completion, did so because of some of the reasons identified in this study.

Personal Comments

I have come to the end of this research journey. Completing this circle within my own circle of life has taken me from a place of wondering to a place of knowing. Although each of us experiences our own journeys at university in a unique way, we encounter, cope and respond to many of the same issues that, at first, may seem to be barriers or obstacles, but, in the end, are opportunities for healing and growth. The experience may start out with expectations of an exclusively intellectual process, but ends up being emotionally and spiritually driven. The true gift that University offers goes beyond textbooks, lectures and class assignments: it is about exploring the self and reclaiming or reinforcing who we are – especially our Aboriginal identity.

This work was written with the intent of understanding the ways that the university experience impacts and affects Aboriginal students so that when they come to university, we, as employees of the university, are better prepared to help them recognize, and respond to the challenges ahead. It was also written for those who began University but did not complete a degree. Perhaps they left because the journey was too tough or the sacrifices were too great. Consider some of these women's stories of survival and reconsider the possibility of returning. Know that you were not alone in your struggles:

others have found their way through these 'hallowed halls', made impressions on the minds of 'thinkers' along the way and laid down their footprints for you to find. We invite you to re-visit the path and see that you are welcomed, capable and deserving.

This work speaks to our immediate families and communities whose help we so desperately need to keep us balanced. We go to university not merely for ourselves, but also for you, our children, and our ancestors. We would like to share the frustrations and the triumphs with you so that we all benefit from our attendance at university.

I sought to make a contribution to the body of knowledge surrounding an Aboriginal worldview and Indigenous research methodology by adding talking circles as a method to the tools available to Aboriginal researchers. Perhaps this work can contribute to the dialogue about Aboriginal student needs and assist in the development of programs and services that will advance the success rate and thereby create a healthier future for our communities through education.

This paper has grown out of my desire to help create a place where every Aboriginal student feels a sense of value in the gifts they bring -- individually and collectively, as Indigenous peoples of Canada. This research is about the strength, power and beauty of these eight Native women. I hope that their words and stories will inspire others as much as they have inspired me. I hope to share the information imparted to me about the sacredness and the power that can come from the journey through university. Together, we can contribute to a brighter, more informed generation of thinkers.

Some Aboriginal people have maintained a strong Aboriginal identity throughout childhood and adolescence, but many have not. I share the need with many Native people to embrace and learn more about my heritage. While no one of us has solved the question of identity, collectively our experiences begin to tell a story. We need to find 'a place' in this university environment to belong: a place where healing and learning can occur simultaneously in a way that enhances our identity.

Through this research study and my work in the Aboriginal community on campus, I have gained many valuable insights that have helped to produce this thesis. The University of Alberta needs to continue to build a community of people who know how to help Aboriginal students without controlling them. We need to help create an

institutional climate that is receptive to our needs and respectful of our Aboriginal heritage.

Change begins with a vision. It must be a shared vision inclusive of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal campus community members. I am hopeful that if we come together 'in a good way', a vision for the future will emerge. I am leaving this work with a stronger sense of my 'self' as an Aboriginal woman, and I am looking forward to 'giving back'.

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